

The Posthistorical Jesus Reader:

**Personal Reflections on the
Historical Jesus, Historical
Jesus Fictions and the
Practice of Interpretation**

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THE POSTHISTORICAL JESUS READER

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1. Introduction to the Posthistorical Jesus

The seed which ends up as this book was first planted in the 1998-1999 academic year when I was a third year undergraduate student in a department of biblical studies. My memory is now a little vague as this was 25 years ago but at this point I think I took a module on "Quests of the Historical Jesus" (which became far and away the best module of my degree course and was all the better for being a subject new to me and so which also had the element of a nice surprise about it) as well as taking two or three modules in the year with by far my most impressive teacher, the Irishman Stephen D. Moore. Moore had a veneer of the dangerous and the exotic about him. It was hard not to get the impression that he was some kind of exciting literary terrorist upsetting the hallowed halls of biblical academia with acts of literary disruption (or, more likely, deconstruction) as he read the bible in weird and wonderful ways which made it seem as if the text was about all kinds of things it couldn't possibly have been about. The thing was, however, he was so good and so minutely precise at reading the bible as he did that no one could really fault it even though it seemed manifestly obvious it was about something else completely. But no. It was about divine violence, male bodies and poststructuralism. It was about postcolonialism, gender studies and autobiography. For one of the modules I studied that year with Moore (I forget which 25 years later) I wrote a dissertation in which Jesus was imagined as a woman (titled "Behold the Woman" in order to parallel Pilate's "Behold the Man"). He gave me a perfect score for the resulting essay and, as a result, I figured I was onto something.

I became a postgraduate and planned to do a PhD but I needed a subject. Jesus, historically considered – but with a Moorean twist, became the obvious choice. But what

was that particular twist going to be? As far as I can remember, now at a 25 year remove and in which most of those 25 years were nothing to do with this, my original idea (which turned out not to be “original” at all) was to argue that both gospels and more modern “historical Jesus” books are acts of autobiography, literary products which speak of their authors (or authorisers) at least as much as they speak to their imagined subjects. As I would later learn, this schtick had basically been done before in the most famous of the historical Jesus books, the book which in fact gave its name to that whole area of academic study – Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* – where the scholar and humanitarian argues that creating a historical Jesus involves writers filling their pages with all the love or the hate for this figure of which they are capable. And they do. Over and over and over again. I didn’t really want to do that though. Just another historical Jesus product seemed uninspiring to me. Much better to criticise those producing them and to undermine the entire field of endeavour by saying that all it was doing was acts of literary masturbation and self-fulfilment that produced a man (usually) in appropriately ancient Jewish Palestinian garb but with the researcher’s own face as his visage. This might be called “history” by those doing it but what would that then make the resulting history into? I resolved to take that journey.

It was a journey that would take a lot longer than I thought. This turns out to be good (in the end!) for at the time I was a little bit (a lot) out of my depth and my circumstances were far from ideal for properly productive academic study. I never completed my PhD because life (and ill circumstance) got in the way but – fortunately – I did not throw away the three years worth of work (which is less than you might think) that I had already done. Instead, I stashed it somewhere and, somehow, it did not get terminally lost over the course of the next decade and a half (during which I moved house, and even country,

several times). Then, in about 2017, I found the floppy disks (remember those?) the work I had done was written on and something about it must have caught my attention because now, with more time on my hands and a measure of stability about my circumstances, I could do something about my ideas. But I had been out of the loop for a decade and a half. Time, and conversation, had surely moved on. I would have to do the best I could with my vaguely remembered fifteen year old ideas and, checking out more recent literature, find out what people had been saying, and publishing, in my absence.

And so I read and I wrote. And wrote. And wrote. And wrote. Eventually I wrote seven whole books worth of material on the historical Jesus, the philosophical context of writing about this figure, the nature of “history”, Jesus as a literary character in books both ancient and modern, modern contributions to the historical Jesus debate, memory studies, rhetoric, fiction, historical studies of the gospels and even my own construction of a historical Jesus. In my mind I was completing my PhD thesis to the best of my then current ability. I wasn’t going to get any award, any credit or even any acknowledgement that I had done so but I thought I owed it to myself to complete the task. And I did. With spots on.

I am now a few years further on even from that and, finding myself writing another book in which I must wrestle with “history”, my mind turned back to these studies I had once done and all the material I had written in them. Now I found myself reading these books and realising, as I did, that the quality wasn’t always very even. However, I did think that some of it was good and stood up to scrutiny even as the person I now am 25 years after the seed of interest in this subject was first planted. So what, I thought, if I went through these books, extracted the quality, and put it all together in a “reader” type of book as

now just a collection of essays on all these subjects? Wouldn't that be the ultimate fulfillment of the idea I had originally had? And so the seed for this precise project was also planted and I began to work through the books, sorting out the wheat from the chaff. As a result, what you have here is the best of my writing on the subject of "The Posthistorical Jesus" which is a Jesus not burdened with being a merely "historical" figure as if history (most often confused with the reality of a past it is not) was all that mattered about him and as if establishing "historical facts" was the most important thing. As you will see reading the essays in this collection, its not, and, even if it were, history imagined as this sort of thing is almost impossible to do in relation to the character Jesus, about whom there is literature but almost zero material evidence, anyway.

So read on if you want to read about the books that Jesus finds himself in (none of which he wrote or had any say in), how they are put together and what they are saying. Read on if you want to see modern historical Jesus scholarship critiqued. Read on if you want to find the gospels questioned and described. Read on if you want to learn how Jesus is an art (and not a science). Read on if you want to hear how history (and not least history about Jesus) is rhetoric and fiction. As a guide to the contents, I have preserved the essays I have included here in the chronological order of their writing so later ones will assume the knowledge of the earlier ones. "Jesus: Possession of Many" and "Fiction is All You Have" go back right to the beginning of this project 25 years ago to preserve contact with all I have ever thought about this subject and with its intellectual starting point in pragmatist, anti-realist and anti-foundational philosophy. They, and their intellectual influences, have, in fact, been formative in who I became. So, in truth, it wasn't just a Jesus this work was creating. It was also a me.

2. Jesus: Possession of Many

Once upon a time there was a man and that man had something to say. He was no one from nowhere and his words became written down and studied by great teachers. That man was *not* the man now known as Jesus of Nazareth. It was me as I was writing a PhD thesis about the images and pictures of Jesus that have been formulated, discussed and, primarily, written down over the years and often with a focus to find “the historical Jesus,” Jesus the man who actually walked among us. That study was an academic and interdisciplinary study that covered history, literature, theology and many semi-philosophical forms of criticism and ideology, all areas relevant to a properly academic study of the subject. This study is, hopefully, to be a more easy to read digest and update of its earlier predecessor which will wend its observational way in this chapter through books about books about Jesus. Along the way we will, almost without realising it, have to address what it means to construct a picture of someone, a question which comes to be about what that person means to us. We will find that we cannot create and construct images of people without there being some stakes for us in that process. We will find that Jesus himself is “Legion”... for there are many (Mark 5). We will find that, in the end, it comes to be about constructing who *we* are as much as who he was and is for us.

Why read if one already knows what one will find, namely, oneself? (Evangelical theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer)

If we possess our why of life we can put up with almost any how. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

In the beginning was the interpretation, and the interpretation was with God and the interpretation was God...everything happened because of interpretation, and apart from interpretation not one thing happened. That which did happen in interpretation was life, and this life was the light of humanity. (My own rendering of John's Gospel 1:1-3)

Human Beings and Meaning

Let me introduce you to psychoanalyst, logotherapist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl. He believed that we all have what he terms a "will to meaning". Short-circuiting his psychological explanation of this phenomenon in the extreme, Frankl believed that we all need a "why" in our lives. When this is missing we manifest disorder(s), when present, things all hang together. This meaning is a unifying and completing force. For Frankl himself this was primarily an existential discovery, something he learnt whilst enduring the horrors of Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps during World War 2. Subsequently to this, in his practice as a psychoanalyst, one of the three great Viennese psychoanalysts, along with Freud and Adler, he verified this discovery and put it to psychotherapeutic use throughout a successful career in psychology via his psychological theory termed "logotherapy".

Logotherapy, in Frankl's words (as found in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*), is "a meaning-centred psychotherapy". The name comes from Frankl's appropriation of the Greek word "logos" (the same logos John's gospel uses to describe Jesus when he writes "In the beginning was the logos") which he translates as "meaning" and the therapy, so he writes, "focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for

such a meaning. According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man". This meaning, writes Frankl, is:

"unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by the human subject alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy its own will to meaning. There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are 'nothing but defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations.' But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my 'defence mechanisms', nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my 'reaction formations'. Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values!"

Frankl here argues for the importance of this meaning we seek. He continues to discuss this meaning when he writes the following:

"the meaning of life differs from person to person, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. To put the question in general terms would be comparable to the question posed to a chess champion: 'Tell me, Master, what is the best move in the world?' There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one's opponent. The same holds for human existence. One should not search for an abstract meaning of life...everyone's task is as unique as is their specific opportunity to implement it."

Psychologically speaking, Frankl believed that the human subject thrives in a situation of tension, a tension which finds its release (resolution? purpose?) in being directed

towards "a worthwhile goal". This tension is "inherent in the human being" and meaning is found in "striving and struggling" at "the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled". A further feature of this meaning Frankl believed human beings seek and, indeed, require, was that it is a matter of "self-transcendence," of something beyond themselves in the world rather than as the result of an internal debate with oneself. Frankl saw human beings as part of something much bigger than themselves and there was no room for any kind of solipsism.

All this necessary meaning-making is set against an existential background of contingency and choice. Frankl believes that:

"at the beginning of human history, humanity lost some of the basic animal instincts in which an animal's behavior is embedded and by which it is secured. Such security, like Paradise, is closed to humanity forever; humanity has to make choices."

But this "transitoriness of our existence" does not lead straight to nihilism for Frankl. What it does is:

"constitute our responsibility; for everything hinges upon our realizing the essentially transitory possibilities. The human subject constantly makes its choice concerning the mass of present potentialities; which of these will be condemned to non-being and which will be actualized? Which choice will be made an actuality once and forever, an immortal 'footprint in the sands of time'? At any moment, the human subject must decide, for better or for worse, what will be the monument of its existence."

To this effect, Frankl pronounces that "having been is the surest kind of being" and he promotes "responsibleness". But since:

"each situation in life represents a challenge to the human being and presents a problem to be solved, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. Ultimately, the human being should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather...must recognise that it is they themselves who are asked. In a word, each person is questioned by life; and a person can only answer to life by answering for their own life; to life they can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibleness the very essence of human existence."

So Frankl delivers a psychology of will to meaning and responsibility, in which the human subject is inevitably addressed by the world and by life and in which she must go beyond herself to find fulfilment and purpose. It is this kind of thinking which I find suggestive by analogy to historical Jesus studies as an academic field which seeks to reconstruct Jesus and to the idea of constructing any kind of image of Jesus at all. Let me explain.

My suggestion is that historical Jesus scholars, and anyone with an interest in constructing an image of Jesus similarly, have their "will to meaning". What they seek specifically in their activities is *meaning* (not just data or evidence or history or sense. Frankl himself wrote that "logos is deeper than logic".) Historical Jesus study, I venture, and the making of Jesus images more generally, has an existential side to it, one in which the participant is himself or herself both invested and addressed. Meaning is found in its process and in its results and this meaning validates us in ourselves as we take responsibility for our existence as historical Jesus scholars, Christians, mythmakers or

whatever else we are when we decide that Jesus was like A instead of like B and that this matters. I want to suggest that our very lives, conceived of as “autobiography”, both result in the (historical) Jesus discourse(s) we produce, part of a meaning-making process, and provide context for our text (and in a way in which disentanglement of the two is nigh on impossible). To construct Jesus is to construct yourself, to take Frankl’s step of responsibility which constitutes meaning-making.

In order to carry through this thesis we need to address a hot topic, that which William Arnal calls “epistemic neutrality,” a philosophical discussion about the nature of knowledge and its relation to the knowers, us. We shall do this primarily by addressing the papers collected together in the 1997 volume *Whose Historical Jesus?*, a volume, as the title usefully suggests, which puts the meaningful and, as Frankl has shown, psychologically fundamental questions of the ownership of, and identity with, Jesus as a significant figure front and centre. But this same question also has a wider context. This wider context is hermeneutical and is represented here by Kevin Vanhoozer’s hermeneutical question which I placed at the head of this chapter. To repeat the question, “Why read if one already knows what one will find, namely, oneself?”

I propose that there are multiple and manifest good reasons why we should “read” even if we do only find “oneself,” *which is not to admit that this is all we do find*, and this chapter should be seen as mounting an indirect answer to Vanhoozer’s question. As illustrations of some of these good reasons I shall focus on two papers from *Whose Historical Jesus?*, that of Grant LeMarquand, which addresses creating or reconstructing Jesus from an African context, and especially that of Jane Schaberg. Schaberg’s paper is the stand-out paper of *Whose Historical Jesus?* and raises many fertile issues for

historical Jesus studies and creating images of Jesus more widely, not least that the title of the volume it is a part of is not mere academic ingenuity. As Schaberg discovers, “the historical Jesus” is a very closely guarded possession of many, very much a part of various autobiographies. It means something and that, in the sense Frankl meant it, is truly existential. It is a way people are making sense of things, of everything, and so of themselves.

In turn, the insights of Schaberg and LeMarquand lead us onto two anthologies of Jesus images. The first is William Hamilton’s *A Quest For The Post-Historical Jesus* and the second is Clinton Bennett’s *In Search of Jesus: Insider and Outsider Images*. Both of these volumes, though with different emphases to be sure, provide plural images of Jesus by their presentation of multiple Jesuses from across literature (in Hamilton’s case) and culture (in the case of Bennett). In the case of Hamilton this is because he now has some terminal skepticism of the historical Jesus project; in his view it has had its day and achieved all it is likely to achieve. In addition, he perceives that the Jesus often found in historical study is used as a crutch or as a bearer of responsibilities he thinks more properly ours. “Jesus is neither for us nor our willingly co-opted helper” is his conclusion in a way very influenced by the seminal 20th century academic study of Jesus published by Albert Schweitzer in 1906. There Schweitzer had concluded that Jesus was an apocalyptic stranger not of our time. Hamilton agrees with that conclusion and with the view that he cannot thereby be co-opted to our very modern agendas. In the case of Bennett, a former missionary, the task is, perhaps, more positive. He wishes that Jesus be allowed to be “Jesus” for those whose culture he is in. Thus, Bennett thinks that “Only when Jesus is Chinese for the Chinese and Indian for the Indian will he truly be for these contexts.” Thus, both Hamilton and Bennett offer a challenge to those who want Jesus

to be some disentangled scientific-realist object in which we are merely the disinterested collectors of his literary or archaeological traces, acolytes bowing down before holy facts. On the contrary, we are the interested and that interest is right and proper, not to be offset, deflected or disguised. This is about meaning and meaning is always *somebody's* meaning.

Ultimately, my point here will be that “the historical Jesus”, a particular concept of a given time, place and mode of thinking, when other ways of thinking about Jesus are added in and when human concerns are accounted for, particularly ones related to meaning-making, is now what I once (unoriginally) termed *the posthistorical Jesus*. This turn from history to posthistory, this challenge to assumed methods of historical procedure and to “what counts” in Jesus studies, opens up our knowledge-accumulating activities to scrutiny, exposes personal and communal interests, and the historical Jesus as an idea, as a goal, becomes the practice of formulating, in Nietzsche’s term, “an expedient falsification”. This phrase of Nietzsche’s, along with his biologicistic metaphors of “life-shaped knowledge”, will aid me in this part of my project as I attempt to makeover our historical Jesus images into ones posthistorical. This may indeed lend to the product of this process the quality of “fiction” but, in line with the thinking of Douglas Templeton in his *The New Testament As True Fiction*, I do not think we need have much cause to worry on that score. Facts may be “plastic to fiction’s touch”, as Templeton avers, but meaning is not simply about facts anyway. There is plenty of truth in a story, for example. If there wasn’t the gospels would be useless.

So what I think we do have need to worry about is the fact that most historical Jesus scholars these days, when venturing into print to shepherd their readerly flocks, attempt

to cover their work with the veneer of an awareness of the issue of “epistemic neutrality” (by saying something like “we cannot, of course, be totally detached, but real history about Jesus is still possible” as if this didn’t involve us) only, in practice, to plough on as if there was no need to have said anything at all. This will not do and the saying of some such nicety only to thereby fit in with current trends, trends chastened by postmodern skepticisms even if those same skepticisms are still resisted, is no longer credible or plausible. I think it is better (and better because more honest and less repressive of what is manifestly admitted to be the case) to be openly autobiographical, in theory and practice, than to carry on in this vein. *I believe that inquiry into the historical Jesus (as an example of Jesus-related meaning-making) is primarily about the creation of meaning* and not the reality or inviolability of material and, because of this, I see him as part of, and the outcome of, that specific network of relations called life. To rebut Catholic historical Jesus scholar, John Dominic Crossan, who once wrote that historical Jesus scholarship was “a very safe place... to do autobiography and call it biography”: this *is* autobiography as biography. That is what meaning-making looks like in this context.

So, in contradistinction to Crossan, I want to argue that doing autobiography and adhering to historical constraints, both in terms of what the past confronts us with and in terms of what historical method, if any, we will make use of, are by no means at odds. Indeed, I want to argue this is both natural and usual. This is the process of meaning-making, something Frankl has argued very persuasively is fundamental to any healthy, functioning human being. One of my points is that both the autobiography and the past as we have it (albeit in the traces that have made it down to us), allow for the diversity that Crossan has formerly found so embarrassing to his scholarly profession. My

conclusion is along the lines of “So what’s the problem?” But let’s now move to look at the sources I referred to above and progress this thinking further.

Whose Historical Jesus?

a) A Problem Vocabulary

As noted above, William Arnal recognises “epistemic neutrality” as one of the current hot issues in historical Jesus studies - at least if the volume he co-edits be representative of current historical Jesus scholarship. That volume indeed finds evidence for such a belief and this evidence is worth noting and analysing for a moment or two.

We may begin with Arnal himself. His end of volume summary notes that explicit *lack* of neutrality in historical Jesus studies (such as that found in, and demonstrated by, the papers of LeMarquand and Schaberg I shall concentrate on shortly) results in the work itself not being taken seriously for that very reason: its form is off-putting and revealing or showing an interest is looked down upon. Perhaps, we might be led to wonder, the scholar writing such work is somewhat rebellious and lacks the appropriate scholarly discipline? This disciplinary attitude, Arnal intimates, hides a conservative tendency to preserve the way the world is, to inscribe various kinds of hegemony into research and even thinking itself. Arnal rounds off his brief comments by speaking of the value of recognising “bias” (which is what “epistemic neutrality” alternates with in the body of his paper); this value is found in recognising we are all subject to “inevitable positionality”. For Arnal, this “positionality,” the admission that we all have an interest, a point of view, some meaning we want to make, apparently has effects (or at least “affects” those

involved) but he does not give any intimation what this might involve. In this, Arnal's end of volume summation is an accurate reflection of many, but not all, of the papers in *Whose Historical Jesus?*, not least in that it rarely gets to grips with the idea that people need things to make meaning for them. With it I would group especially the following:

Robert L. Webb takes an "observe your existential concerns and then offset them" approach in his note introducing a paper by Larry Hurtado. Peter Richardson, in his paper entitled "Enduring Concerns: Desiderata for Future Historical-Jesus Research", notes a "major methodological issue" surrounding what evidence should be "heard and preferred". None of the kinds of evidence he presents seems free from interpretation, potential anachronism or the imposition of present cultural standards and values. Barry Henaut, in an article surveying the work of Martin Kähler, Ernst Käsemann and Burton Mack in particular, finds that history and methodology can be used for non-historical or non-methodological (i.e. personal) purposes. (Surprise, surprise!) Stephen Westerholm, giving perhaps unguarded vent to his scholarly frustrations, finds that in a lack of scholarly agreement about the historical Jesus, and the seeming ubiquity of the historical Jesus creators' "own ideals and convictions", is "a plague that continues to bedevil the quest". This elicits from the perhaps tortured Westerholm at least two occasions to exclaim "alas" and almost a wish that, as a biblical academic, he did not have to get involved in historical Jesus study at all.

Another member of this group is Edith Humphrey who presents a paper on apocalyptic writing and wonders whether the scholarly historical Jesus reader will allow themselves to understand via this medium or find apocalyptic, and apocalyptic interpretations of the historical Jesus which are now regarded anachronistically in our modern world, as a

stumbling block. Leif Vaage, as another example, finding “disinterestedness” something still bothering and “befuddling contemporary efforts to discuss the historical Jesus”, takes the route, once more, of suggesting that the “biased” historian may be alert “to possibilities of reconstructing the past which others without similar prejudice may not have noticed.” “Bias”, it seems, has its uses too! Whatever paper we seem to turn to in *Whose Historical Jesus?* “the stakes and consequences are not usually a matter of indifference”. But should we expect any less? Not if, having read Frankl’s story and his psychological insights, we conclude that *human beings make meaning as stomachs grind up foodstuffs*.

This issue (and vocabulary) of “epistemic neutrality” is perhaps best presented by Larry Hurtado in his paper “A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Work”. Whilst describing the work of eight historical Jesus scholars, work done between 1984-1993, Hurtado wishes to demonstrate that the scholars concerned come to different conclusions without consensus in sight besides providing pointers for future historical Jesus work. The first point here need not detain us since it is, in another guise, exactly what we are currently attempting to explain and, indeed, justify. As to the second matter, this is worth analysing in more detail since Hurtado’s approach is revealing.

Having adduced the requisite lack of consensus in his representative band of scholars, Hurtado paints a picture of a branch of scholarship slowly sinking into the mud under the weight of its own industry. “The range of evidence is daunting”, he tells us, and, adding to the burden, “Sound historical work that is to be of broad and lasting use in the field must also interact fully with other scholars on all relevant issues. The oceanic amount of scholarly work germane to historical-Jesus research will make this difficult”. To relieve

the burden somewhat, Hurtado presents a new criterion of historical authenticity. We should regard the historical Jesus as analogous to the ancient texts that convey him and, as if we were text critics, aim “to reconstruct the reading [i.e. the Jesus] that best explains all the variants.” Thus, via this process, and using a critical and technical skill many historical Jesus scholars may already have, we sift our evidence and work our way back to the original Jesus thus solving the problem that everyone keeps making (or finding!) their own. In this “we should...prefer...that reconstruction of the historical Jesus which best accounts for the variation in the sources of early provenance”.

But why follow this procedure? Because “we need a procedure involving something more than the preference of the individual [and sadly non-consensual] scholar”. Indeed, for Hurtado difference and diversity seem the problems they are for Crossan that I referred to above. Diversity, in fact, has to be dealt with, Hurtado and Crossan both agree. And since for Hurtado “it is a major objective to reconstruct a now lost ‘original’ historical Jesus,” one not tainted, so he would think, by our meaning-making, and the situation vis-à-vis the historical Jesus scholar is bleak (with their concerns hovering all around in a non-consensual, particularistic swarm of diversity), this seems a good, solid, methodological way out. We must go about our historical Jesus inquiries with “a proper scholarly rigour and self-critical ability”. Method, he believes, will trump our desire for meaning.

And, thus, does Hurtado, I think unwittingly, perfectly describe the problems of the vocabulary and paradigm of “epistemic neutrality” and “bias”. He seems to offer a “4 Maccabees approach” to historical Jesus study: “A most philosophical subject I am about to discuss, that is, whether devout reason is sovereign over the passions”, as the book 4

Maccabees itself begins. This is not by any means a new problem in human thinking. Its as old as the discovery that human beings can think AND feel and someone (quite stupidly) decided to set them in opposition. Its a very human question, it is to ask what and who we are, how we work and what we can, and cannot, achieve.

For Hurtado "devout reason" should rule "the passions", "scholarly rigour" should put down "existential preferences, commitments and concerns". But this is both self-deconstructing and (thus) impossible. A concern (existential or otherwise) to "offset" another concern is itself a concern. How does Hurtado suggest we adjudicate one concern by use of another, or keep one whilst dispatching its cousin? He gives no answers, and that, I think, because his philosophical paradigm, his vocabulary (realist, objective, admitting of an original Jesus who could be found) is deceiving him as to the shape of his problem and as to the makeup of a human being: Hurtado finds himself locked in an unhelpful discourse which works against his best interests. Put simply, some concerns, some passion, must be retained - that cannot be avoided. It is not a matter of devout reason *or* the passions; it is which passion shall rule the roost and conjure up the reasons for now if we are going to be appropriately and organically holistic about it – as we should be. Human beings *are* organically holistic, not federations of separable parts and faculties which can be turned on and off at will.

There is a further issue here. Hurtado has spoken as if text criticism, the model for his way out of the many historical Jesuses problem, was the collection of pristine and uncontaminated antiquarian data. Hurtado is looking for the algorithm that gets him back to Jesus as material, "the original Jesus", which will provide Jesus as meaning, "the original meaning of Jesus" - and he means to do this whilst keeping out of the way

himself. He thinks that if he gets one (the material Jesus) he gets the other (the meaning Jesus). What he has not either foreseen or admitted as a possibility is that text criticism is *not* the detached search for an original text which can then be given over to the exegetes who, in their woolly and biased way, start “interpreting” as they please. It is, instead, the active and interpretive process of piecing together a text based on what makes interpretive sense. Text critics look to reconstruct their texts, and their relative histories, interpretively, dealing with texts whose meaning is not simply or naively in the texts alone in some “original” sense. Such critics provide a reasoned basis for why they choose one variant over another, and that because these issues are not predetermined: they are matters of debate and choice and “original” is one such choice that must be arbitrated. It is an interpretive task all the way down and so the “problem” is not then solved.

It seems that Hurtado is either denying this is the case (which he doesn’t seem to be) or, more likely, he has not even considered it as an option. Yet how does Hurtado conceive that text critics operate if they do not have some interpretive framework at hand, a framework based on their own interpretive choices as well as their knowledge of the material? Hurtado makes the error of separating the collection of pristine, meaning-inherent material (which is his fantasy text criticism) from the interpretive meaning constitutive of the process of text criticism itself. This leaves Hurtado with a choice: either he thinks that his criterion, and the conception of historical Jesus study it presupposes, is to be defined as mere collection of data (along with its supposed innate, original meaning) or he must accept that his criterion, as a part of wider historical Jesus study, does not escape the pitfalls he has amply, in his terms, already set out with some dismay. Hurtado simply rushes to the conclusion that “original”, if he can give some

material that epithet with justification, trumps all. It ends the meaning game he wishes to escape. He doesn't see at all that this isn't escape from the meaning game: this *is* the meaning game!

But there is yet another problem with the approach in Hurtado's paper. For, when probed, the "original Jesus" concept is found to be without substance and the issue of "epistemic neutrality" or "bias" implodes. For what does "epistemic neutrality" consist of? What is the scholar's "bias" against? In order for these metaphors to work there has to be something real, solid, and definable to kick against. But, as this little discussion has continually shown, and as scholar after scholar has found it necessary to repeat, all we seem to have is human interest(s). And so Hurtado or some other historical Jesus scholar such as Webb or Vaage have reached their Waterloo: its time to show your way works or start evaluating "existential concerns" by other means, paradigms, vocabularies and discourses. The "original Jesus" paradigm so many want to try and breathe life into as it rots in its tomb, with its "biases" and "existential concerns" and "epistemic neutralities," must either more willingly embrace existential/philosophical challenges or give way to paradigms which make specific human interests *constitutive* of their processes and results. You can try and evacuate images of Jesus of their personalised meaning but, in the end, you will actually find that such meaning is all you really have and, like the skin you are covered with, you cannot get rid of it without destroying yourself. To make a picture of Jesus, even if you regard yourself as a professional academic and your image is christened "historical," is only to be done if your existential concerns and meaning-making faculties are fully involved, critically engaged and totally embraced. This is what making a picture of Jesus consists of. *Jesus is you looking in the mirror and seeing him.*

b) Vocabularies of Difference and Liberation

Such embracing, such looking in mirrors, if Grant LeMarquand and Jane Schaberg are to be believed, is exactly what African and Feminist historical Jesus scholars practice. Here we have different, more openly interested, personal and engaged approaches. I shall take these scholars in turn.

The approach of Grant LeMarquand in his paper “The Historical Jesus and African New Testament Scholarship” is of the “bias can help us” type. But what marks out his discussion of African scholarship on Jesus is its presentation of that scholarship’s cultural difference and the differing cultural and political needs that “the African historical Jesus” needs to fulfil: “African biblical scholarship, not content to leave Jesus in a first-century context, is compelled by social, political and religious convictions to demonstrate his relationship to contemporary African life”, he says. This life, he reports, is replete with a confessionality and a spiritual world where spirits and miracles are thought of as real that changes the context for a picture of Jesus that can be believed in and thought of as meaningful. A Western academic might not need to believe miracles really happen but an African thinking of Jesus might is LeMarquand’s point.

LeMarquand claims that this African difference will help Western, northern hemisphere scholars. This is a claim that awaits validation whilst, perhaps, making self-interest the measure. Whatever the case, African scholars are certainly dubious of Western (“our”) scholarship and wish to disentangle it from the historical Jesus, another sign that ownership, and therefore what is meaningful, is in play here. But then they have interests to serve, as LeMarquand notes: “Biblical scholars working in a context of acute

and visible suffering (such as an African context often is) are perpetually challenged to demonstrate the relevance of their work". Africa is not a comfy North American campus or some parochial English theological college. This, in itself, could be regarded as suggestive of a question: if Westerners are also embroiled in their scholarship, in their making pictures of Jesus, but claim to have no relevance agenda to serve and are trying to avoid their personal interests, then what are they doing instead? Simply propagating careers to keep themselves alive? Serving themselves?

Perhaps two statements LeMarquand quotes from white South African historical Jesus scholar Albert Nolan may stand for his description of the tenor and purpose of African historical Jesus scholarship as a whole: "The method is historical, but the purpose is not" and "[W]e do not need to theorize about Jesus, we need to 're-produce' him in our time and our circumstances". Such purposes are clearly political in orientation. The historical Jesus simply has to mean something in African context, has to make a difference, has to count. What else would be the point? Often in the examples LeMarquand quotes in his paper this is a matter of a close relevance to the Jesus found in historical traces with the struggle for power and representation in many African countries, often on racial or cultural grounds. A culturally irrelevant but supposedly historically accurate white man's Jesus would be useless in such a context. In fact, he might be seen as the enemy. He would certainly be seen as beside the point. He would be *useless* (the unforgivable sin). The accusation of uselessness is exactly one many white male Christian scholars make of the idea of an historical Jesus at all. He cannot be the basis for *their* faith. Quite.

Jane Schaberg's experience of historical Jesus study demonstrates something similar. It demonstrates that when we describe some concerns of the historical Jesus scholar as

“existential” or “personal” we are not merely referring to matters cognitive, mental or philosophical - for in her case these terms (existential, personal) would refer to very concrete effects in the structure of her professional and private life. She has, as she confesses, “struggled to keep her career on track” due to the, at times, vilificatory and vitriolic response to her historical Jesus work (and, perhaps more accurately, to others’ own presentations of it). In brief, Schaberg wrote a book in which she floated the idea that Mary’s rape resulted in the birth of Jesus. It resulted in her receiving hate and threats as well as condemnation from the pulpit by bishops and the attempt to remove her from her academic position. Her paper in *Whose Historical Jesus?* had originally meant to address the question of why historical Jesus scholarship ignores or frowns upon feminist contributions, particularly those of the most well-known feminist biblical scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. However, it takes a more personal tone because her own experience is that being ignored is not the only way to attempt to silence or marginalise feminist or other ideologically engaged historical Jesus work.

In a way, and I say this without judgment of Schaberg, Schaberg should not have been surprised at the responses she received inside and outside of the academy to her own work as well as the willed ignorance of the historical Jesus academy to her fellow feminists’ work. For Schaberg’s brand of feminist scholarship, whether coming directly from itself or in the minds of others, is made out to be overtly, brashly, political and subversive. It aims to be iconoclastic and it wants to change the agenda and begin a new discourse. By being not in the “malestream,” as feminists often call traditional scholarship after Schüssler-Fiorenza, she is immediately designated by it as marginal. When Schaberg tries to utilise tools in order to make political progress, resistance is going to be felt for Schaberg is kicking against the goads. When all hell breaks loose, as

it did in her case, politics (academic, religious, media, personal) is exactly what she should expect for this is the type of arena she is in and political progress (or at least political debate) is part of what she wants.

The proximate cause of the troubles Schaberg reports in her paper is a report on her work compiled by the religion reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*. This reporter chose, in Schaberg's words, to report on "an angry uncredentialed loose-cannon feminist, dogmatically preaching 'the gospel according to Jane' on everything from Mary's rape to abortion rights, while threatening to sue her university". Schaberg reports that the response involved distancing by her (Roman Catholic) university via "public statements and internal silence", indifferent responses from her fellow faculty members (some were hostile, others remarked on how the incident might affect the university's economics), and the archdiocese of Detroit chose to go "on the offensive" via public media and in its pulpits. The Archbishop of Detroit himself spoke against the reported views of Schaberg, linking them in with the abortion debate that is ongoing in the United States of America.

The ultimate result of all this, as far as I can tell from reading Schaberg's paper, is that the marginality of her position, and her feminist scholarship, was politically reinforced. Let it not be said that a political agenda is easy, certain to succeed or a road paved with gold. And yet, despite these political and personal traumas, Schaberg claims to have learnt a number of things through the presentation of her scholarship and the meanings inherent in it. These are:

1. "that sexism and misogyny are deeply rationalized, theologized and spiritualized"

2. "that societal attitudes about sexual assault assume the culpability of the victims and draw strength, we may suppose, from repression and guilt"

3. "that hatred and blame are directed most particularly at the female victims of violence"

4. "that the official doctrines regarding Mary denigrate normal women"

5. "that these doctrines...draw on, and at the same time obscure, the human need for a feminine dimension of the divine"

and

6. "that fundamentalists and the ultra-orthodox see, as liberals often do not see, that biblical and traditional images of women go hand in hand with the denial of women's rights to control their own bodies and lives."

In addition, and not least, Schaberg has also learnt "the danger in even following a good feminist methodological procedure and speaking personally in or about one's scholarly work; the responses, negative and positive, to feminists' work and persons". This latter point is reinforced when Schaberg notes that "This incident I have described - or something like it, or the threat of it - is the context in which feminist New Testament critics pursue their work. That is my major point". But (in Schaberg's context and mine) the key here, of course, is the question Schaberg herself addresses: "What has this got to do with historical Jesus research?" This question itself is relevant when Leif Vaage, who

writes a short paper in the same book, questions Schaberg's interests, claiming that "she seems to have no particular interest in Jesus". Schaberg's answer, however, is that these interests have "A great deal" to do with historical Jesus study. Exactly why can be summarised from Schaberg's paper in four points:

1. In historical Jesus studies there is not a level playing field; "we" are not carrying out "our" studies equally.
2. We must question whose interests we are serving in our studies. Are they those of the status quo? Such studies will only serve the interests of those the status quo insulates (and leave those not insulated prey to the power plays involved in them).
3. Everybody's angle is both valid and not the only angle, as our experience(s) will show given half a chance.
4. Apocalyptic, viewed as "the energy and discipline for an egalitarian socio-political experiment", warrants more research. When linked to "the New Testament passion/resurrection predictions, the stories of the empty tomb and the witness of the women", it may ultimately prove to be "central to a feminist understanding of Christian origins".

By my analysis, all of these points (as with LeMarquand's description of the interests of African historical Jesus scholars) bear the marks of personal, autobiographical involvement. As such, Schaberg's feminist approach, engaged politically and personally as it is, holds out a number of distinctives, issues to consider if you will, for historical

Jesus scholarship: enlarged framework of discussion, new directions, different presuppositions, interests and questions, the open use of experience and the possibility (probability?) of conflict, for example. Such scholarship is a demonstration that for some, even in Western ivory towers, all in the garden is not always so lovely, so without stake, so meaningless and detached, so historically sterile. One further thing it does, and almost without noticing, is see historical Jesus studies as a set of competing discourses carried out in distinctive vocabularies rather than being about the historical Jesus as an object who is in receipt of our privatised glances. This last item, if only in philosophical terms, is no bad thing.

So both LeMarquand and especially Schaberg in some senses attack the search for an "historical" Jesus if by that we mean one man who can stand front and centre and command the equal and undivided attention of all. LeMarquand and Schaberg both show that this will never be possible and reveal that social and personal interests, the need to make social and personal meaning, are constitutive of the process of finding a Jesus we can call historically relevant. It is not that "normal" or "proper" scholars don't look for meaning and these loose cannon others do. Its that all do but some are more honest about it than the others. So, for example, as Schaberg points out, "Feminist interpretation in a sense deconstructs and undermines the quest; it is not so interested in Jesus the individual, as in the relational Jesus, Jesus in his social world, Jesus reforming his social world. To be more specific, feminist critics are interested in the search for the historical women of his movement". To mean something to Schaberg Jesus has to fit into a social network, one that speaks to women and their concerns. In highlighting this she not only reveals her personal need for meaning, she also uncovers

the presence of that same meaning in others, namely men, male scholars and a male-dominated ecclesiastical world.

c) Vocabularies of Plurality and Plasticity

William Hamilton, as far as I know, got there first with the term "Post-Historical Jesus". When I alighted on the term myself I was unaware of his book, or his use of the term. Hamilton attempts to use the term to mean that Jesus who is free of restrictive historical conditions (and conditioning) - for Hamilton's book is about the Jesuses of literature. One way to sum up his book might be the following:

"You still take the Bible far too seriously as a source of reliable historical information. Just as there is no 'me as I really was', so there is no certain sense of the meaning of the Gospels. They simply do not deliver my inner meaning, whatever that means. Their stories are fictions; all stories about me are, even those that pretend to be histories." (This speech is given by a fictional Jesus Hamilton himself meets on a beach.)

That is, we have a turn from the historical Jesus to the fictional Jesus, or, rather, a turn from the historian's Jesus to the poet's Jesus. Hamilton offers a "christological exploration" and he claims to inhabit a space labelled "radical theology" which "is both conservative and religious because it seeks to define the conditions under which Christianity might still be intellectually and morally possible". Painting our times as in need of a response to "Reaganism and Thatcherism", (which gives a clue as to when the book was published!) Hamilton has a historical Jesus informed by post-Schweitzerian insights:

"...Schweitzer insisted [that] our historical methods are not powerless. They have just been tendentiously employed. The Jesus of history is accessible to our research, and what we find is an enigma, a stranger, one who did not come to solve our problems. Historical investigation released Jesus from dogma, hoping he would thereby glide comfortably from the first to the twentieth century. He was released; he did visit us; and he returned at once to the apocalyptic-eschatological world of his own time."

This insight, that Jesus "as he was" is a Jesus "either inaccessible or irrelevant" results in Hamilton's research programme which is to search for a post-historical Jesus, a literary and fictional Jesus, but one that still speaks to our need for meaning. It is further based on what he terms "a consensus":

"Jesus is inaccessible by historical means...or...we can know something about Jesus, but what we know is of little use to us in the late twentieth century ...or...There is a good deal that we probably do know about Jesus; the trouble is that we can rarely, if ever, be sure precisely what it is."

Therefore Hamilton thinks that:

"The post-historical Jesus is what remains after we have determined that some or all of the above three points are on target...we gladly relinquish our anxiety about historicity, and begin to separate judgments of importance from judgments of historicity. This also means giving up trying to find, by historical means, a Jesus who agrees with us...By 'post-historical Jesus' I mean the Jesus we can turn to after we have determined that the historical method

(and its cousin, theological interpretation based on that method) has given us everything it is capable of giving..."

"The theologians and the historians can offer neither a convincing Jesus of history nor Christ of faith. The Gospels are not a mixture and interpretation that our wisdom can distinguish. They are, in fact, fictional or ideological portraits designed to meet need, to stimulate imagination, intelligence and action. It is time to turn from theological earnestness to the poet's play."

At this point, after setting out his course, Hamilton gives his readers a veritable anthology of various literary and poetic Jesuses from the 19th century onwards (plus some liberationist political ones in a chapter concerned with "How to Invent A Political Jesus". (Hamilton is not enamoured of the "political quest" - he finds it all so much fiction and ideology). Highlights are Harriet Beecher Stowe's (black) feminised Jesus, as featured in such books as her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Footsteps of the Master*, and Jim Bishop's *The Day Christ Died* which, according to Hamilton, "knows a lot more about what happened to Jesus than the New Testament does, but that is OK; that is why we can call it fiction". Also of note is a section of Hamilton's book which details the Jesuses of poetry, and often 1960's, drug-induced, poetic Jesuses.

Salted throughout Hamilton's text are comments to the effect that all "Jesus writing" is fiction, most ideology, and that our appreciation of the literature concerned will fairly match our appreciation of the writer's particular faith. Hamilton seems happy describing a multitude of poetic, literary, and often populist, literature on Jesus whilst letting the occasional pithy comment do his intellectual work. But it should not escape the reader of

his book that he is working with a historical, perhaps, in his context, illicit, construal of Jesus in mind, even if it is that strange and unavailable foreigner he regards Schweitzer as having. But then again, he himself can write in his own analysis that "These tales ask to be enjoyed and to be figured out. These, along with our own Jesus fictions, say something about the authors, about the readers and about Jesus."

And then there is the Jesus of Hamilton's epilogue, one who happens upon him on the beach one day as Hamilton is taking his regular walk. (Compare John's gospel, chapter 21.) This is an enigmatic figure, indirect, not easily put into a stereotypical pigeon-hole (historical or religious). He chooses which questions he will answer and how he will answer. Hamilton is hesitant, tentative, in his presence, his own religious affiliations in question in his historical situation at the end of what he refers to as "the century of death" (i.e. the 20th century). Hamilton's Jesus here, in his own explicit "fiction", is anti-authoritarian, almost laissez-faire in his attitude. This is not a Jesus burdened with saving the world or "carrying his cross" (compare Mark 8:34f). Indeed, it is almost as if he came to wander: "Just don't assume that my function is to meet your needs," he warns. This Jesus seems strange and distant, difficult to get along with - and then it hits you: this is the Schweitzerian, foreign, unavailable, inaccessible Jesus in fictional guise, for this Jesus too is not here "to solve our problems"! We have here been learning about the Jesus that means something to William Hamilton. It has been both his historical reading of Jesus and his fictional construction of Jesus.

So what is the point of Hamilton's book? I read it as asking Jesus scholars to put a "historical" Jesus behind them or to one side of them because such thinking does not grasp the truth about Jesus anymore than any other way of imagining him would. Our

thoughts need not always be clouded with “historical anxiety” about what we can know and how “real” this might be. But I also read Hamilton’s book as one which does not wish to let go of truth, existential truth, useful truth, even historical truth. This is, after all, “the Jesus we can turn to” as far as Hamilton is concerned. So Hamilton’s Jesus is a Jesus that means and has the benefit of serving some existential purpose (as, presumably, are all those many he details for somebody). Finally, in the light of Hamilton’s fiction matching his history, Hamilton’s book lends the sneaking suggestion that history is not something so easily avoided as context for Jesus: you cannot hide from it or pretend it doesn’t exist if you think any Jesus existed (as not all do – but that’s just another version of the same story). His fictional construals and presentations of literary Jesus images lends to the historical Jesus debate the question of meaning and historical constraints as non-negotiables and shows that the parameters, available within these twin constraints, are wide indeed, perhaps even as wide as our own, specific historically-funded imaginations.

Clinton Bennett’s *In Search of Jesus: Insider and Outsider Images* similarly details numerous images of Jesus. His book is valuable for placing side by side what he terms “the traditional [Christian] view”, a history of the academic quest for the historical Jesus, that which he terms “outsiders” views on Jesus (from Celsus to Rasta Fari, white supremacists, Morton Smith, William Blake and the “Jesus-is-a-myth” school which believes Jesus to be a personification rather than an historical person), as well as Jewish and Muslim views and Hindu and Buddhist views. Bennett’s book, perhaps more than any other read during the research for this study, presents a rich plurality of views on Jesus. His approach is sincere and he attempts to put himself in the place of each audience he addresses in his text. After all, for Muslims Jesus is a Muslim, for Jews a Jew. And not

only this; that we receive one image of Jesus does not mean he stays that way. Bennett reports that while many Indians did not agree with the West's judgment of their own religions during the colonial period they warmly received the stories about Jesus they were told - and then rapidly assimilated them to their own experiences and understandings, taking Jesus and dropping the Western Christian trappings. In this way, in Bennett's book we have Jesus appearing as a member of differing world cultures, fitting each one in turn like a glove. This is testimony to the power of culture and the ease of assimilation of Jesus if nothing else. He can belong to many, and that simultaneously, multifariously and with some plasticity.

But Bennett also has some academic criteria to impose on the Jesus images he presents. One is historical and theological ("any depiction of Jesus that has some rooting in what can be historically and theologically affirmed of him is authentic"), another is pragmatic, emancipatory in intent and almost certainly political ("all responses to Jesus...must be judged by their fruits, by their effects on people's lives; do they liberate or enslave, do they turn people away from self towards communal solidarity, or encourage love of self? Do they encourage the privileging of some above others? Do they challenge hierarchies, elitism and unjust exclusion?"). Bennett believes in letting people speak for themselves and he wants to put the matter of "authentic interpretation of Jesus" in question. He quotes Holland Hendrix with favour when he speaks of Jesus as an "interpretation" right from the earliest sources and, furthermore, as a "plurality" of interpretations. And his conviction is that "no theology can be meaningfully read without also reading the theologian". Finally, he has a pluralist ethic: "What does Jesus mean to those who possess [a] particular image of him? I suggest that all images of Jesus which respond to his universal appeal represent interpretations that have validity, or authenticity, for

those individuals or communities who possess them". Why is this? Because "the fact that they even exist suggests they meet some genuine human need, or respond to some genuine question about who Jesus was". This is all very interesting and encouraging from my perspective as one who sees that in the meaning our images of people have we learn as much about ourselves and who we are as who we think they are.

Summarising Bennett's approach, we should say that he seems to lift themes from the historical Jesus' life (as he sees it) and then take them and look for them wherever they may be found in other pictures of Jesus. For example, the conclusion to his book revolves around the concept of Jesus as "liberated and...liberating"; where this (historical?) theme can be found in pictures of Jesus there Bennett finds the existence of an authentic picture of the historical Jesus. However, he does also conceive that "a bare set of facts can be asserted, with reasonable confidence, about the historical Jesus", although he doesn't say explicitly what these are (as, for example, historical Jesus scholar E.P. Sanders or a body like The Jesus Seminar does). Yet his overarching method seems to be to verify the existence of such historical themes as he can find in the images of Jesus he surveys - and this allied to a survey of what human needs these Jesus images serve. This, in its turn, opens up the prospect of Bennett's proclivities (personal and historical-critical, one assumes) questioning and judging those of the others. Bennett acknowledges that this is his situation, seemingly without any interest in, or recognition of, questions of cultural relativism or the incommensurability, or otherwise, of the cross-cultural discourse made necessary by his procedure. He acknowledges that texts and stories are open to a multiplicity of interpretations which are free to be used as people will. He states only that he has a right to critique them based on his own understanding. Bennett regards this as being "inclusivist" as he explained to me personally in an email

conversation we had during the initial writing of this chapter. However, it is inclusivist against the background of how he judges the history. Its still very much involved with how he understands things and what they mean for him.

In Bennett, then, we have a tolerant-liberal-pluralist research programme where many Jesus images may, subject to certain constraints, stand side by side. What Bennett acknowledges is, amongst other things, the recognition that Jesus images clearly find a home in the existential meaning of someone's life. This is not to be overlooked as mere pandering to the self in Bennett's eyes but, rather, demonstrates its own kind of integrity. What Bennett deplores most of all is any one picture of Jesus, historical or not, claiming the field for itself (for we simply have an "inability to definitively find Jesus"). Jesus is not, cannot, be one thing. Jesus is not the possession of any one scholar, school, academic or religious grouping, or culture. Put simply, there are many ways to crack the Jesus nut, many points of entry, many networks of relations into which some aspect of his (historical) character, mission or message may be inserted or from which they may be extracted. Bennett, in laying out the plurality of Jesus images around the world, amply demonstrates that, whilst he means many different things to many different people, none of them end up owning him at all... at the same time as they all do.

An Expedient Falsification

Thus, my researches have evidenced a wide range of approaches to the historical Jesus and the ways in which people have tried to grasp hold of the man and turn him into something meaningful. All have admitted autobiographical or existential involvement in the process of historical Jesus study. Some have sought to "offset" this involvement,

others have found it more constitutive, even important and vital. I am in the second camp. For me historical Jesus study, like any form of creating a picture of Jesus, is a matter of human interests first and foremost. This is both my valuation and also my responsibility. It is a matter of drives pressing the situated and constrained reality of the historical Jesus into service, of our needs interpreting the world. As such, this approach seems to be somewhat Nietzschean. This is the Nietzsche of his collected notebooks in the posthumously published *The Will To Power*, specifically the notes in the third book of that volume and his "Principles of a New Evaluation". I want to offer a picture of the student of the historical Jesus in this Nietzschean light as an example of a person who goes looking for a Jesus that can mean something to them. This will function as a bookend much as I made use of Viktor Frankl's logotherapeutic light to help me characterise historical Jesus scholars, and the situation of their studies, to start it.

This Nietzschean historical Jesus scholar seeks to prosper and preserve the discourse that is their thinking (their form of life). This thought exerts itself as will to power ("All meaning is will to power") and seeks to test itself against the resistances that are the evidence(s) about/for Jesus. The scholar's thinking needs this resistance (which can manifest itself as displeasure in the on-going process of research), this evidence which is not of it but can be put to use by it, for it is this which will make its goal, its increasing of power through meaning for the purpose of utility, achievable. It is a "game of resistance and victory" in which the historical Jesus scholar "impose[s] upon chaos as much regularity and form as [their] practical needs require". There is a desire to approach this matter, this evidence, and overcome it, that is, to use it profitably as a kind of intellectual fuel. In this, things become what they can be made to become. They cannot become what they are not but can only become what they can be. The life of the historical Jesus

scholar here is decisive; what can be used is used, what cannot be used is not used. The life-shaped knowledge of the present, funded by a very specific past, creates a usable future. The evidence for Jesus enters into a relationship with the historical Jesus scholar, inserted into a network of relations. In this our vocabulary is set up to define the boundaries of our ignorance and “the horizons of our knowledge” and this “knowledge”, woven into “regulative articles of belief”, is what is useful for life. We get what we need from what is there to be had, thinking rationally and logically (these too are abilities suited perfectly to a form of life) to achieve this “according to a scheme that we cannot throw off”. What we have is “systematic falsification”, a “misunderstand[ing] of reality in a shrewd manner”, an “expedient falsification,” fictionalization. In building our Jesus, in excavating a past with our past in our present, we interpret, we use our “means of becoming master of something”, and “we...do what we are”. In this lies the value of our activity. In short, if this process works (as it must) we survive and Jesus survives as the meaningful thing we have made him into.

Epilogue

So in good pragmatist order what consequences has all this had? How in the symbolic battle of Jesuses, does my “posthistorical” Jesus challenge the hegemony of the historical Jesus? In at least the following six ways:

1. In the sense that “history” tries to get things right whereas “posthistory” knows that things are always wrong (in the sense usefully falsified, narrativised, more than facts).

2. In the sense that “history” is literature and therefore not subject to a paradigm of “originality” and “fixity” but to one of “usefulness” and “suitability to purposes”.

3. In the sense that this “historical Jesus” is funded by our life’s history and for that same life’s prosperous continuance (i.e. it is consistently and constitutively personal).

4. In the sense that discourse or description X about the “historical Jesus” is not the only possible, viable or valid one. As the purposes, so the Jesus. Thus, with William James in *The Will To Believe*, we can say that “we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will”. (James originally used this criterion in order to argue people had a right to believe in gods if they could not help doing so.)

5. In the sense that meanings, not materials, maketh the “historical Jesus”. This is another way of pointing out the plasticity of materials, their susceptibility to bend and meld under the heat of interpretation. It further is to point out that what counts as material is similarly a matter of meaning. So I stand against non-interpretive givens and original meanings standing in the past arbitrating their own status.

6. In the sense that discourse or description X about the “historical Jesus” is the result of prudence and utility, contingency, constraints and chance. Thus, neither the process of historical Jesus research nor the “object” the historical Jesus are “free”, anything cannot go. What the historical Jesus always is is within some kind of, or someone’s, bounds as a discourse.

Falsified, interpreted, existential, plural, plastic, contingent: the posthistorical Jesus.

3. Fiction is All You Have

"'I've finished,' groaned Jesus, gratefully giving up the ghost. Late that night, his father came to claim the body. Never one to stand on ceremony, he went to work there and then in the tomb. First, he skinned the corpse. After he had laboriously removed the body hair by scraping, he scrubbed the skin clean, sighing all the while at the punctures and tears that marred it. Then he smoothed it with pumice and dressed it with chalk. Perspiring profusely now, he careful cut it into rectangular sheets, stacked and folded them meticulously, and sewed them along the creases. Leaving the book on the slab, he wearily vacated the tomb before sunrise, dragging the flayed corpse behind him. Soon afterwards, the book was found by two of Jesus' disciples (as it was meant to be), one of whom recognised it as the remains of his master and lovingly bore it away. Years later he would use it to write the first draft of his gospel." (Stephen D. Moore, "On The Face and Physique of The Historical Jesus")

I want to set you a task, one I recently gave myself. Type "Jesus" into the Google search engine and select "images". What you will almost certainly get back, as I did, is a cavalcade of *white* Jesuses, the recorded history of popular images of Jesus over decades, if not centuries or even two millennia. This is passing strange if you think about it since the one thing we *do* know, if we know anything about the historical Jesus at all, is that he was a first century Palestinian Jew. And first century Palestinian Jews, might I suggest, were not *white men*. My hits also contain one black Jesus, equally inaccurate (and a blackface version of a Warner Sallman white Jesus to boot, which is worse), and one reconstruction of the face of a first century Palestinian Jew from the 2001 BBC TV series, *Son of God*. These aberrations aside, I am confronted with a cultural tide of

whiteness, a testament both to cultural hegemony and to the idea that people want a Jesus like them. Not just Jesus' robes are white in the collective imagination it seems. Perhaps the transfiguration that resurrection seems to demand makes everybody white and I am just not yet aware of it?

I was first apprised of this phenomenon thanks to the very corporeal concerns of my former university lecturer (for whom I once imagined Jesus as a woman) and the person really responsible for why I am even doing this, Stephen D. Moore. The paragraph with which I began this chapter is the opening paragraph from his own essay addressing Jesus' physical appearance in what was at that time (the beginning of the third millennium CE) the contemporary quests of the historical Jesus. I recommend wholeheartedly that you find a copy for yourself to read since it is both entertaining and deeply incisive on issues to do with images of Jesus with which we are also here concerned. One deeply penetrating question that Moore raises here is why biblical scholars of very high standing and reputation within the field of historical Jesus research are allowing very fictional images of Jesus to be slapped on the front covers of their books, seemingly without much of a second thought about it or its consequences. Moore is right to follow up this question by asking how the readers of these books are then supposed to take it. (One here muses, in a Moore-like way, that the answer might be "like a man".) The written content of the books is, no doubt, to be taken with the utmost seriousness. But what of the pictorial and very fictional (not to say outright false, imaginative) information they have also supplied?

This is of importance, in a study such as this one which is to do with human meaning-making, when Moore suggests that our main cultural image of Jesus is "a northern

European savior whose physical characteristics proclaim his distance from the despised race whom he has been sent to redeem". I can't speak for you but my mind immediately goes to millions of white Americans who proclaim themselves Christian yet seem to hate Jews (and Palestinians generally, in the historical sense, if truth be told). Are these people, 2,000 years later, now blissfully unaware that their saviour was a Jew and that he *didn't* look like them? In fact, he looked much more like the people they seem to hate. But, of course, the fault is not theirs alone. This image of Jesus is under the skin of all of us. But it is a *fiction*. As Moore suggests, "God's and Jesus' own appearance does count for a great many people(s)". Yet, as Moore goes on to say, "To anthropomorphize God is to confer ethnic identity upon God". This has become the white construct, the white fiction, we are all so familiar with. Whiteness is next to Godlikeness. To be white is, thus, to be more like God and non-whiteness is less like God. Yet whiteness is itself a constructed category as Moore knows well. So we should be able to agree with him that, "Contrary to the cliché, therefore, this God is acutely concerned with what is outside a person: his very existence depends upon it". Carried away on a very white flight of fancy, we may eventually come to the very man-shaped but ultimately dehumanised Jesus of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Victorian priest and poet:

"...his body was the special work of the Holy Ghost. He was not born in nature's course, no man was his father; had he been born as others are he must have inherited some defect of figure or of constitution... But his body was framed directly from heaven by the power of the Holy Ghost, of whom it would be unworthy to leave any the least botch or failing in his work."

I am not really quite sure what to say to that but my notated copy of Moore's essay simply has "Oh brother!" written beside it in pencil. My point here is simply that perfect white male (and apparently non-human) bodies are doing stand in work as the highest beings we can conceive of. What is probably worse, if we think about it, is that we know the truth to be other than as we have consciously conceived these bodies. In short, we have fictionalised Jesus and we are quite happy about it. Fiction, in fact, is the truth as far as we are concerned.

I was musing on this fact as I took one of my regular walks and, wanting to be relevant to the modern world, I thought about what that world of our increasingly homogenised Western experience is. We live in a world where we cannot even agree about what has happened or is happening. An event occurs and there are immediately several partisan and tendentious versions of it reported and the "spin" begins. (As I was writing this study the Las Vegas shooting occurred. Example. [Edit: now, a few years later, I'm aware readers might be thinking "Which Las Vegas shooting?" since there have probably been others].) We have websites which proclaim themselves as news sites and yet this is news as Obi Wan Kenobi might give it, "True, from a certain point of view" (as he explains to another blue-eyed white boy saviour, Luke Skywalker, having previously said that his father was dead only for Luke to find out that it was, in fact, Darth Vader. Spoiler alert). We have seen quite clearly and repeatedly in the modern world how fiction becomes fact over and over again. We will quite regularly hear complaints made that public information from numerous sources is no longer trustworthy but, instead, a fictional narrative suited to particular purposes. Fiction is very much king in today's world and millions of people are more than happy to swallow it whole. Just tell me what I want to hear.

It might not be immediately obvious but this comes to be relevant for a discussion of the historical Jesus and the meaning-making that surrounds it. In his excellent study of the historical Jesus, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, Dale C. Allison goes very deeply into millenarianism and what characterises such movements. In a “detached note” he details 19 features of such movements “outside the Jesus tradition”. It is the nineteenth of those which draws my attention now:

“Any millenarian movement that survives has to come to terms with disappointed expectations, since the mythic dream or end never comes.”

The beloved disciple from John’s gospel no doubt knows exactly what Dale Allison means. But, I wonder, does conservative scholar, Tom Wright? Allison’s point here is that when the hoped for or even prophesied things never occur we get what he calls “secondary exegesis”. The non-events have to be explained and, slowly but surely, the narrative builds and gets changed. “Just tell me what I want to hear”... but keep the story going so that we can still believe it today. “After the fact rationalizations,” says Allison, “are almost inevitable”. He concludes:

“It is easier to deceive oneself than to admit self-deception.”

Far from having no use for fiction, then, or it being restricted to harmless leisure time stories, human beings actually thrive and even wallow in it. It is the motive power of life itself. That dream, that hope, that inspirational vision, that reason to keep on going, it needs keeping alive and that means it needs feeding. Fiction is the perfect sustenance for that. Perhaps this is how a dead first century Palestinian Jew comes to be the shiny,

perfect-skinned, white saviour of modern conception? No more a scruffy odd job man from Galilee with a very time and geographically bound focus, he is now free, in the fictions of his followers, to roam the globe bringing white salvation to the masses who will become white like he is. "White" here, of course, means so much more than just a colour as any even cursory analysis of his white apologists will demonstrate.

Psychologizing Jesus

Of course, there are better and worse ways to fictionalise things and often complementary ways do the most comprehensive job. The beauty of fiction, since it is narrative in form, is that it is a way to make sense of things on a broad scale. Having taken care of fitting the big things together, the smaller things can be integrated with little sub-narratives. Like a basket full of puppies, so long as all those legs and heads have somewhere reasonably comfortable to rest then the whole basket can snooze undisturbed. Jesus, the perfect white man who now shines like a divine superhero, is not a very historical fiction though. But there are those who provide more historical ones and who see the need for Jesus to be a man and not merely a god. This is a particularly Christian fictional problem since, after three centuries of fictionalising Jesus, Christians realised that they needed him to be both fully god *and* fully man or, somehow, the salvational scheme they had worked out wouldn't work. This seeming contradiction, from which they have never escaped, is preserved in the creeds they invented, instructing all believers to give assent to such godhead *and* manhood, although I have barely met a common or garden Christian who could explain how this particular fiction worked to any great extent.

All this aside, it is one criticism of the quests of the historical Jesus, in which I have taken part sporadically, that, in doing such research, those doing it were looking for a more human saviour or a figure to whom they could give some measure of respect in distinction to the very obviously fictionalised god-men of popular religion which contemporary times had rendered distant and unsympathetic. Albert Schweitzer, to whom I will come again later, in what is perhaps still the most important book on the historical Jesus and which is actually called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, very heavily criticised those who wanted to humanise Jesus and make him comfortable and domesticated for modern day use. He, like Tom Wright whom I mentioned earlier, wanted to try and force historical meaning-makers into a choice between the Jesus as presented in canonical gospels or a Jesus made up from thin air, one who didn't exist. Ultimately, Schweitzer pronounced the gospel Jesus an historical alien to our times so it was fortunate that his own faith came not from an historical Jesus but from a very present spiritual Christ of faith unbound from historical constraints.

But not all faith, or rather meaning, does. For some, Jesus the man, Jesus the man we can relate to, is what attracts. And what better way to be able to relate to him as *a human being* than to psychologize him! Thus, we have John Miller's 1997 book, *Jesus At Thirty: A Psychological and Historical Portrait* (from the cover of which another post-Renaissance white man stares blankly at us). Miller, who has biblical and psychiatric experience, attempts to understand the inner workings of Jesus through chapters dealing with his family, father and (of course) mother explicitly, his baptism and sexuality amongst other things. His sources are only the sources everybody else has which, clearly, are neither directly recorded by Jesus himself nor, as we've already seen, are they

uncontested sources of any kind of truth about Jesus in the first place. So what is going on here?

Miller starts his preface with an interesting observation: portraits of Jesus fit in with their time and place whether this be “good shepherd,” “cosmic ruler,” “the crucified” for the guilt ridden or many others. None of them are, god forbid, a drawing or painting of the man himself. Indeed, we have no image of Jesus because, as far as we know, no one ever recorded, or described, what he looked like. All images of Jesus are meaningful fictions constructed to say something about their creators and admirers by saying something about him. And so it seems when, in his preface and opening chapter, Miller justifies his own “urgent task”. This task appears to be no lesser task than keeping Jesus realistic and believable for modern human beings in a world in which “historical study and psychology are converging in our culture to create a significant new matrix for understanding Jesus”. Indeed, “if Jesus is to continue to occupy a place among us as a guide, savior, mediator, prototype, we are thus compelled to form a clearer, more intelligent impression of this (psychological) side of his life than may have seemed necessary in previous generations.” Modern human beings, it seems, need modern saviours too. Miller also raises the intriguing notion that these very human investigations may be the old christological ones of the first three centuries of the Common Era being undertaken again in a very contemporary vocabulary. Indeed, in his own preface he asks that the results that emerge from his study might be considered “of importance for the construction of a meaningful contemporary christology,” a clear case of historical mining for the purposes of contemporary meaning.

But of what use is the study itself? This is a hard question to answer. There are certainly problems and some may judge them insurmountable. Firstly, there is dubious use of gospel sources. Miller makes all four canonical gospels his historical source material but does so with no historical-critical appraisal of the material that I can see. Crucial to the developmental psychological profile he attempts to build are incidents such as Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (including his supposed vision of a dove) and what are referred to as his temptations by Satan or the Devil. Many, many historical Jesus and gospel scholars would regard these events, in their recorded detail if not whole, as later Christian inventions. This problem becomes worse, having read the whole study, when it seems as if Miller just pulls in any gospel material deemed support for his psychological profile without any historical-critical analysis of the text required. If it fits the profile it seems to be regarded as historical. This really isn't satisfactory and leaves Miller open to the charge that he is building a profile of a synthesized gospel Jesus and not a historical one.

Miller may respond to this charge, however, by claiming that his study is paying attention to "the established results of historical Jesus research," a phrase he uses in a useful appendix to his book which gives a brief overview of previous psychological study of Jesus. "The historical Jesus," then, does seem to be what Miller thinks he is studying when he criticises past psychological studies for not doing so. When he talks about the "temptations and developmental conflicts" Jesus may have suffered he does think he's referring to the historical Jesus. But, as we have already seen, there doesn't seem to be much difference in practice between this Jesus and one that is a synthesis of canonical gospel material, one in which his psychological profile does the choosing. So how "historical" really is this process? Miller lists 9 studies in a footnote that he calls "the

more substantial conclusions of recognized historians working in the field,” studies by scholars such as Geza Vermes, James Dunn, Ben Meyer, Martin Hengel, Marcus Borg and John P. Meier. (My view on his scholarly biblical sources generally is that they skew towards conservative and Christian.) But in a previous footnote he quotes Graham Stanton with approval when he says, “there is little evidence which suggests that large numbers of traditions were simply made up by Christians in the post-Easter period” which gives the impression that Miller has basically decided to believe everything unless an outstanding reason for *not* believing something were to raise its ugly head. Here it seems relevant to point out that if the temptations of Jesus by Satan are considered reliable history then what else in the gospels wouldn’t be?

In building our own profile of Miller, then, we start to get the impression that this is a study to find a traditionalist, conservative Jesus, certainly one who will not scare believers. Miller’s chapter on the sexuality of Jesus here stands out in which Miller manages to talk, ostensibly, about that sexuality for several pages but, at the end, you realise that he has basically said nothing about Jesus as a sexual being at all. This Jesus may indeed have a penis and a full set of testicles (at least, this isn’t denied) but you better believe he never uses them. Here a very coy and conservative tendency to refuse to fully embrace the idea of a properly human Jesus raises its very ugly head. Jesus, in this study as in so many others where Jesus is de-sexualised and, therefore, dehumanised, is made celibate (and presumably a lifelong virgin). But its more than celibate. He never has a single rude or naughty thought. “Although he found women attractive,” writes Miller, who will brook no notion that Jesus was gay, “he did not look at them lustfully.” Now, I ask you, in an avowed “psychohistorical” study of the historical Jesus how can Miller legitimately make any claim such as this? As history this is

completely fabricated guesswork. There is no evidence for this one way or another. The strong suspicion that Miller is here being guided by other, christological things such as that Jesus was “without sin” is mightily apparent. This is ironic when Miller can bemoan “a still widespread and largely unconscious resistance to a full recognition of Jesus’ humanity and the more obvious emotional factors at work within it” earlier in his study. The trouble is that here Jesus must be human but not *too* human. You can be sure that this Jesus did not even masturbate so much as once and neither did he follow the curves of another’s human body and fantasize about it. Is that a picture of a human, historical Jesus? Is that even a valid psychological picture of a human being?

So what Miller is giving us is a modern narrative for an ancient purpose. It is christology by other means, a Jesus that modern, 21st century Christians can believe in. It is the gospel Jesus linked together within the context of a psychological narrative. It wants to humanise Jesus at the edges but for the purposes of, somehow, making him even more the god that he was before, enough like us that he becomes attractive to us (historical Jesus) but enough not like us that he can still be set apart, holy (Christ of faith). Miller makes great play of the notion that Jesus was “tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15) and takes this to mean that Jesus emerged from the psychological trials of his life victoriously as a “generative” (the term is related to the neo-Freudian, developmental psychology of Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson) adult man, one who had gotten over the troubles of a father who died in his early teenage years and a mother he became, in some measure, estranged from for the sake of the Kingdom. This fictional narrative of one man’s struggle to overcome the trials of life reads, in some ways, as a quest romance narrative but one is left wondering if this was ever really in doubt. Jesus is Lord and Saviour and this is a makeover to humanise such a being, a being

who would seem as distant and unknowable as any if left in the clouds of heaven. Yet if we can speak of struggles with friends and family, of inner turmoils and of the temptations which we are all very familiar with then, so it seems, what we are left with is a modern picture of Jesus, one not only useful for christology but one that has been christology all along. That Jesus was fully human is, after all, a christological statement! Miller has provided a modern fiction in support of it.

Albert Schweitzer and The Quest of the Personal Jesus

If we had read our Schweitzer, of course, we should have known better. Schweitzer, in fact, was also a man qualified in biblical and medical areas. His *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), which was a magisterial book on the quests for Jesus up until the beginning of the 20th century and a study which all taking part in this field of study have had to reckon with since, was partly responsible, in Schweitzer's own mind, for a negative attitude towards Jesus' psychology. After all, in *Quest* Schweitzer had described Jesus as a man so obsessed with the end of the world that he had tried to force it into happening. So in 1913 Schweitzer published a medical thesis, *Die Psychiatrische Beurteilung Jesus*, in which he attempted to rehabilitate Jesus' sanity and to present him as at least a sane man of his own time and place with the eschatological beliefs he maintained were the only correct way to view Jesus as a character of genuine history. So, putting these two studies together, this is Schweitzer's own version of the psychologically healthy historical Jesus.

But it is Schweitzer as an interpreter of previous biblical scholarship (then usually regarded as simply "theology") which resulted in an area of study called "historical Jesus

research” that concerns us here. When Schweitzer begins his tale, arbitrarily with the post-death publication in 1778 of fragments written by Hermann Samuel Reimarus, there was, properly speaking, no such thing as “the historical Jesus”. Contemporary biblical scholarship, as the populace generally, considered that the gospel Jesus was Jesus the historical figure (as some dogmatists still do to this day). To doubt this was simply blasphemy rather than scholarship which took a different point of view. Schweitzer aimed to show that with Reimarus and his view that “Jesus in no way intended to abolish this Jewish religion and introduce a new one in its place,” thus opening up a division between the earthly Jesus and the one that lives on because of proto-Christian belief, a new, right and proper historical debate began, one which would lead straight to his own historical Jesus, an eschatological prophet of thoroughly Jewish caste who believed he would play a part in God bringing about the end of the world. When it didn’t happen he tried to force it to and was killed in the attempt. This eschatological vision, the one of which Schweitzer had himself become convinced, is the major hermeneutical key he uses to describe, in almost 500 brilliant pages, the course of what will come to be regarded as historical Jesus research. Along the way his thoughts become indispensable even for modern scholars setting out upon the Quest. For instance, he states:

“each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Jesus in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus. No vital force comes into the figure unless a man breathes into it all the hate or all the love of which he is capable. The stronger the love, or the stronger the hate, the more lifelike is

the figure which is produced. For hate as well as love can write a Life of Jesus, and the greatest of them are written with hate... It was hate not so much of the person of Jesus as of the supernatural nimbus with which it was so easy to surround him, and with which he had in fact been surrounded. They were eager to picture him as an ordinary person, to strip from him the robes of splendour with which he had been apparelled, and clothe him once more with the coarse garments in which he had walked in Galilee."

The "they" there refers to Reimarus, who was Schweitzer's starting point and the first, in his view, to hit upon eschatology, the keystone of Jesus' history properly carried out, and the second was David Friedrich Strauss who, in 1835, had published his *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, which was a thorough-going application of the concept of mythologisation to the four canonical gospels. This was not a new process in itself and had been applied liberally in the Old Testament and even to the beginning and end of the gospels. But it had never been applied to the entirety of the gospel material before and so, when Strauss did just that, according to this story and that story of the gospels the description "myth" in the process, it created a religious and academic scandal which, in a nutshell, ruined the rest of Strauss' life. Schweitzer, however, in his reporting the tale of Strauss over a number of chapters, marks him out with Reimarus as one of those who, although scandalous to their times, had actually set scholarship on its way to a properly historical appreciation of the gospels and so of the Jesus within them. Strauss' historical procedure, which was to combat the twin "critical" approaches of the time which were an unsupportable supernaturalism and a ridiculous rationalism, was to apply the category myth to the gospels as a way to explain their contents without the need to fall back on either of those previous approaches, approaches which had given all they had to give but without success. But from Schweitzer's point of view what was one of the most

notable things about Strauss' procedure was that what were left being regarded as "the most authentic of all" the gospel materials were exactly the eschatological passages. Schweitzer notes, for example, that "even for Strauss the problem of the son of man is already the central problem in which are focused all the questions of messiahship and eschatology". The third of Schweitzer's scholarly forebears in his study will be Johannes Weiss who makes eschatology and "the kingdom of God" the entire focus of Jesus' activities.

In characterising all this historical Jesus research from the previous 130 years Schweitzer notes that "it did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma." Schweitzer further characterises the whole industry as a "school of honesty" for theology generally. Moreover, in general comments on the whole enterprise, one, lest we forget, he thought had produced genuinely useful historical results, he regarded the whole thing as a matter of "experimentation" in which "the guiding principle must ultimately rest upon historical intuition." In this "the sources give no hint of the character of his (i.e. Jesus') consciousness" and, interestingly:

"It is not the most orderly narratives, those which conscientiously weave in every detail of the text, that have advanced the study of the subject, but precisely the eccentric ones, those that take the greatest liberties with the text."

This line of thinking continues as Schweitzer works his way through the 19th century and gets to those who flat out deny that Jesus ever existed. He concedes that this is one way to go but he notes that such people as do argue this seem motivated by a "higher

purpose" which they regard as "sacred". Schweitzer also berates the language of certainty which can often infiltrate such research. He writes that:

"To assert that the historicity or unhistoricity of Jesus has been proved is a way of speaking which, though common enough in everyday conversation, in the sphere of strict scientific thought means no more than that according to the available evidence the one is very probable whereas the other is not."

Schweitzer's own historical skepticism reaches a peak when he says that "Modern Christianity must always reckon with the possibility of having to abandon the historical figure of Jesus."

But it is this connection between researcher and researched which is really highlighted and pointed up for me by Schweitzer's study. Indeed, this relationship seems to be the entire basis on which Schweitzer has proceeded in the first place. Consider the following from towards the end of his book:

*"The real Jesus could prove in his whole range of ideas to be so determined by the time in which he lived that our relationship with him could become a problem. A defence which does not in advance consider the possibility that Jesus may turn out to be 'too historical' is not, in fact, impartial. It is defending the historicity of Jesus, but only of a Jesus **whom it has itself determined.**"* (emphasis mine)

Thus the Schweitzerian conclusion that:

*"And if we consider, too, that his (Jesus') understanding of himself, his expectations, his teaching, his decisions, and his actions are all eschatologically determined, this further strengthens our (i.e. Schweitzer's) impression that his personality is alien to us and to the time in which we live. Thus at first sight it seems far easier to accept the idea that **we can have absolutely no relationship with him** than it is to accept that we can."* (emphasis mine)

On the very next page Schweitzer will criticise "modern theology" for "tempering the historical with the unhistorical to a degree sufficient to retain a Jesus of whom it can make use of for its own religious ends." Schweitzer finds this procedure inauthentic because he finds trying to understand Jesus as the historical person inauthentic. All it finds, in his view, is a man who speaks another language, the language of a first century Palestinian Jew who wants the kingdom of God to come now. This, Schweitzer imagines, is an alien, foreign language to us. It cannot speak to modern people. We need to "liberate ourselves from the thought forms which were available to him." Historical terms used of and possibly even by him become for us "historical parables."

But it must be noted most strongly that in all this Schweitzer *does* want a relationship with Jesus. He just wants one that he can regard as authentic instead of one which tampers with history for its own purposes. He wants the "ineffable mystery" who will come "as one unknown" in the memorable words of his final paragraph. Thus, Jesus as a character is not a personage of no matter or import for Schweitzer. It is exactly because he is such a person that all this industry finding a historical person in the first place has been going on (in those he reports on as in himself). Schweitzer's study has been an object lesson in the uses and abuses of history but also a powerful witness to the fact

that when people get involved in such things what and how they see moulds the material they have at their disposal and the narrative that emerges. He may well come “as one unknown” but we researchers are very keen not to leave him so. Schweitzer’s “alien Jesus” is both a way to cut off certain historical (or, as Schweitzer would have it, ahistorical) meanings of Jesus *and* a way to necessitate the meaning Schweitzer wants. In either case, a Jesus who means is what counts and what fiction or mythology is deployed as an explicative narrative is important as we saw previously in this chapter with “white Jesus” and “psychologically well-adjusted Jesus”. “Each individual created Jesus in accordance with his own character” is Schweitzer’s judgment on an entire branch of biblical scholarship. Quite. Reach out and touch faith.

Rorty and Nietzsche: Reality as Useful Fictions

Assuming we don’t wish to argue that all these Jesuses being found, that bear the imprimatur and imprint of their maker-finders, are merely the result of sub-standard inquirers, people who, despite their best intentions, succumbed to finding what they wanted to find in spite of themselves (and I don’t), how might we best explain that this seems to be what pretty much everyone does? My own way to explain this will be to turn to Richard Rorty and Friedrich Nietzsche, philosophers who regularly appear in my work as anti-authoritarians who make philosophical sense without giving us bosses whom we must bow down before. It turns out that both, from their different but sometimes compatible locations, each tell stories about human beings, their cultures, their knowledge, their truths and their ways of being in the world which give a wide angle of view on what is going on here in historical Jesus studies too. The stories they tell in fact make it easy to see that Jesus is not being treated in a special way when he is viewed

historically by so many different people and communities with their differing needs. He is just quite a famous example to take as a subject of study which highlights a much bigger and all-encompassing subject: human beings and how human beings negotiate their way through the world at all. In short, Jesus in this study has not been the subject of the study but just an example to focus on which reveals how humans operate. But let's move, with anticipatory haste, to the stories Rorty and Nietzsche tell to make this more explicit.

In the second, third and fourth chapters of his 1999 book, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Richard Rorty, under the heading "Hope in place of knowledge," gives a cut down, popular version of his brand of pragmatism. This is under the headings "truth without correspondence to reality," "a world without substances and essences" and "ethics without principles". In each chapter, as the headings suggest, he seems to take something away that people have claimed (and sometimes still do claim) that we human beings have needed to get by. Is Rorty being mean and not allowing us to cling to our safety blankets anymore? My reading of Rorty suggests that he doesn't think we human beings need any safety blankets.

Take "truth without correspondence to reality," for example. As Rorty would have it, "truth" is not a goal of human inquiry. So we don't need to worry if we have it or not. Beliefs about things, he tells us, are mostly true most of the time for everyone anyway. Think about it. If we human beings went around and 90% of what we thought was true was false then we wouldn't survive, would we? Our picture of the world, and the truths that make it up, have to be as true as the world needs them to be or we wouldn't last very long. What we call truth has to be able to survive the daily grind of living in a world

we do not control. So you can't just make things up and, crucially, you cannot believe a single thing that you couldn't justify to yourself or to the necessary others of your community that need to be satisfied in order for it to be taken as true. So, for Rorty, the problem is not "truth" or "certainty" or "knowledge" and how we know we have these things. The normal operation of the world takes care of these things. We do not need procedures for ensuring them or to try and map something called "reality" to make sure we are right. So there is nothing to be said about the connection of truth and justification or about "the limits of human knowledge," for example. Rorty would prefer to substitute the relationship between now and the future for this or to swap "epistemology," the attempt to ground things, hardwire relations and so achieve certainty, for "hope," the opportunity to create and practice a better human future. All there is to say about truth or justification or beliefs is that there is simply the process of justifying beliefs to audiences. And that's it. That's enough.

This tendency to want to map things or, as Rorty will describe it elsewhere, to want to atomise things, believing that if we understand the little things that make up the bigger things we will achieve some unique insight that will be complete understanding, is also under fire when Rorty moves to "a world without substances or essences". This particular essay has the point of showing that ancient dualisms, things like appearance-reality, subject-object and *nomos-physis* are misleading and unhelpful. Much better, argues Rorty, that we simply think of everything "panrelationally" like numbers. There is no essence of a number. A number is just a number and there is no way to get inside it to behold the essence of it. Every description of the number is just another description, a way of relating it to other things with different descriptions none of which is any more essential than the next. So, as Rorty tells this tale, "everything is a social construction"

which is to say that as linguistic beings with social practices everything, natural as well as conventional, will “always be a function of our social needs”. What we are then concerned with is not “reality”, nor the fear that all we might have is “appearance” instead. We let this distinction go and, realising that power is all there is to knowledge, the ability to use and make relations between things, different ways to relate one thing to another being all that we can do, we concern ourselves instead with “the relative utility of descriptions”. This follows from the belief that there is nothing to be known about anything except the sentences used to describe it. All that we know about things is that certain sentences are true of them. So, like numbers, no way of describing something is “the inside way”. We should waste our time if we wanted to try and map reality somehow by searching for essences that are not there to find. Instead, we should forget the dead ends of knowing and certainty and turn to the future hope of creating. For we can certainly do that and, with hope, profitably so.

Truth, knowing and certainty are all very well. But what about ethics, human conduct? Here the instinct to map is revealed to be “principles” and it will not surprise you to learn that Rorty thinks we do not need them. Here, Rorty tells a more explicitly developmental tale, based on Darwin’s evolutionary example. We humans, he says, are just cleverer animals, language using animals. We differ from the lower animals only in degree, not kind. We are not set apart, a completely different thing. Our difference from them can be explained by telling a tale of development rather than mapping out essential differences and saying what the essence of each is. We are just a further advanced developmental stage. Analogously, we can think of ethics and, in so doing, principles as hard and fast guides or explanations for ethics seems to drop away. This is because there was no point in the past, says Rorty, at which practical reasoning stopped being

prudential or useful to become moral or authoritative instead. The one developmentally and all by itself morphed into the other and, that being true, it was always both and neither. So it really becomes pointless to talk about either as it is an empty distinction. For the same reason that we should drop the distinction between reason and the passions, that it is a bad way to think about things, we should drop distinguishing principles from prudence or useful ways to act from moral ways to act. What we actually need to focus on is not the ontological status of things but debating the utility of alternative constructions of how human beings should progress. It doesn't matter if reason or passion, prudence or morality suggests a certain course of action (a desire which reveals a desire to be right according to some unargued for antecedent). What does matter is the priority of the need to create new ways of being human and to create societies which demonstrate an ever larger loyalty to ever wider groups of people. We will find these ways by discussing them, says Rorty, not by trying to divine a moral law which somehow arbitrates from some non-human vantage point.

What all three of Rorty's chapters here point towards is a view which prizes hope for future human development over a backward looking need to be certain we have things right first. On Rorty's view, we need neither an unavailable map of reality nor to be certain we are right before we can progress. Simply armed with our socially-enabled and linguistically-articulated humanity, we have all we need. Our human situation will provide all the things that it will seem to some like Rorty has taken away and, if it doesn't, forget them. We clearly didn't need them in the first place. Here the stories we tell ourselves, the way we understand our world and our situation within it, should not be thought of as certainties or things which, by human investigation into the nature of things, we can turn into certainties. They are simply fictions, mythologies, useful ways to

understand things which help us to get the things we want. Their usefulness is the only recommendation they need. And this is where Nietzsche's story helps us out further.

Nietzsche never published the short essay "On Truth and Lie in A Non-Moral Sense" in his own lifetime. It was written in the early part of his publishing career in 1873, shortly after he had published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, with which it is often included today as an added extra. It is a very short essay, easily read in under an hour, and in it, like a later book Nietzsche would publish, *Twilight of The Idols*, he philosophizes with a hammer.

He begins by telling a parable of "the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the history of the world." This was the minute when we humans invented cognition, something Nietzsche regards as "insubstantial and transitory" and "purposeless and arbitrary". From here Nietzsche writes, in 50 foot high bold relief lettering, about how the human intellect is *merely* human, something fitted precisely and *only* for a human form of life. We think that we are understanding life, the world and the universe with our arrogant thinking, suggests Nietzsche, but, if it could talk and think as we, wouldn't the midge too? Cognition, understanding, knowledge, truth, it puffs up those who imagine to possess them. They overplay their hand. This cognition is not ours' by coincidence though. It was, after all, fitted to our form of life. It was necessary for us and gives value to our existence, and that mostly by deception and dissimulation. This preserves the humans who, with their "constant fluttering... around the one flame of vanity," are possessed of "illusions, dream-images" and "illusory consciousness".

If all human beings lived alone this might be enough, Nietzsche concedes, but they don't and so some form of "peace treaty" is required and part of this is the convention known as truth and its distinction from something else called lying. But don't confuse this truth for actual, real, genuine truth disconnected from the human beings, warns Nietzsche. Truth is only wanted for certain useful features that would be of benefit in this social situation such as the avoidance of harm or its life-preserving consequences. It is "truth from the human point of view" or "truth as it is of benefit to human beings". Pure knowledge, pure truth, or either of these things where there are no consequences for human beings, are strictly of no interest to the humans. Here Nietzsche shows human beings to be consequence-driven; the *use* of truth is what is important and not its status or "reality". For the humans, truth is just self-preservation.

From here Nietzsche now goes into his own little version of a Rortian narrative of development, remarking how words were once just "the copy of a nervous stimulation in sounds". By a circuitous route our language, which gives our truth something of the nature of a tautology rather than being a map corresponding to the landscape of reality, becomes merely a human relating of things to human beings. Metaphor is loaded on top of metaphor in this process and, in so doing, we confuse ourselves. We think we may, in fact, have created a map of reality and that, through language, we can gain access to the map. But we are wrong. No correspondence is going on and all we've done is to relate things to us. We utilize concepts to try and help us understand but these are just generalizing falsifications of things, a "making equivalent of that which is non-equivalent". Thus, "what is individual and real" is glossed over, conceptualised and generalised to enable our form of understanding. It is thoroughly and uniquely *anthropomorphic*.

And now we get to the point:

"What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins."

But we have not finished yet for this has only described society's imposition of truth upon itself for the maintenance of good, life-preserving order. "How about the drive to truth?" asks Nietzsche. Well, of course, human beings have forgotten how they got to where they are. They have forgotten about their slow development from one thing to another. But Nietzsche says that exactly this unconsciousness about it has allowed them to arrive at the *feeling* of truth. This feeling for truth, and its opposite, the despising of the lie, helps human beings to feel confident about truth and to keep telling themselves how good this truth is for them. This, over many years, becomes the systematizing which comes to define humanity and the fictionalizing by which we have success and all this without ever being that thing which we might imagine truth is, a pure truth unrelated to human needs or purposes or consequences. We create the conventional world. This world is thoroughly human and so, of course, we feel totally at home in it and because we feel at home in it it becomes something "regulatory and imperative" for us. "Truth" means fitting in with this constructed human system and this, in turn, becomes the foundation of human life.

This thing which makes us feel most at home about this truth, however, is also that which is, from an imaginary, non-perspectival and pure view, its problem. It is not “truth-in-itself” or “pure truth”. It is not what is true behind a veil of appearances. It is just anthropomorphic truth, truth as is useful to us. Human beings have now made themselves the measure of all things but they become forgetful that this is what they have done. Our measurements become the measurements from nowhere, reality, pure, unalloyed, inarguable, unconditioned, facts. We forget it has all been mediated through us and for us. It is conditioned and not unconditional. It is truth “by faith” and a subjective, creative faith at that. We have swapped the aesthetic relation of this truth for a totalising perception we never had. “It is not true that the essence of things appears in the empirical world,” says Nietzsche. That fact that metaphors can harden up and seem to become facts or truths is no guarantee of necessity or its’ justification, he continues. The fact that our knowledge and our truths seem not to be about our imagination or creation is by the by. Everything we know is a matter of things having been related to human needs and consciousness and understanding. It is all a relating of things to each other in an endless cycle. We never get outside of it or inside of it because it is all just a network of relations. This even extends to science. “All the conformity to laws which we find so imposing in the orbits of the stars and chemical processes is basically identical with those qualities which we ourselves bring to bear on things, so that what we find imposing is our own activity,” says Nietzsche.

And so, whether in language or in science, Nietzsche finds a human drive to create the world of our experience and existence which he terms “the anthropomorphic world”. This “drive to form metaphors” cannot be left out of the account for to do so is to leave human beings out themselves. The human being has created a “web of concepts” in her

head. It might be a myth, it might be a dream, but either way "human beings themselves have an unconquerable urge to let themselves be deceived." "Creative contentment" for the human being is as good as any and, indeed, they become intoxicated by it.

It is by thinking on these two visions, those of Rorty and here of Nietzsche, that I come to the notion that human beings are fictionalising or mythologising or rhetoricizing creatures. This is not a faculty applied to various subjects or topics as necessary or something that applies in certain circumstances. It is not what human beings do if they have become disturbed or are mistaken or have gotten confused. It is a large scale explanation for how we humans understand or inquire into anything at all. It is, without hyperbole, what we are. I am claiming that human beings, as a matter of course, create narratives which constitute the world. Into these narratives fit all the apparatus of truth and knowledge and beliefs whose function is to make those worlds seem real, believable and justifiable. So, in this sense, fact is fiction. In this sense, fiction is true. In this sense, what you know was created, where being created was no different at all to being given. I am saying, just as Nietzsche and Rorty were in their own ways, that human beings routinely create the world that the world of cause and effect allows them to create. This world might be a little more plastic and pliable than those who want to find maps to reality would like. But from Nietzsche's perspective this drive to truth will not be stopped and from Rorty's all that counts is a better future, not searching for a map that was never there to find.

So I'm saying that fiction is all you've got because creating fiction is what you, me and everyone else does. For some that fiction is "I am finding the authority to which I think we must all give fealty" and to others it might be to answer the question "What is the

most emancipatory person I can be?" but in each case it is fiction understood not ontologically but in terms of the drive that Nietzsche spoke of. The fiction or mythology or rhetoric (each of these terms will do) is the activity of humans to utilise their world of existence and experience for their survival and greater good. My conception of the person here is, naturally, more than simply a conception of the physical self. It encompasses all we think we are, our thoughts, feelings, emotions, beliefs, etc. When I talk about our survival I mean our survival as identities, as the people we think we are. Applied to a discussion of the historical Jesus, this would become the creation of the person we create him to be because of who we need to be to be who we are. Historical Jesus study is the relating of the historical Jesus to the self, a community or something else. For all inquiry is fictional mythmaking related to us in a rhetorical context.

This would not come as a surprise to Rorty. Indeed, he would have imagined me to have written far too many pages working up to something completely obvious if this is all I've got. "*Of course* they are social constructions," he would say. "And so are atoms, and so is everything else. For... to be a social construction is simply to be the intentional object of a certain set of sentences - sentences used in some societies and not others." And, realising this, Rorty envisions us giving up pointing it out because now we have something better to do: "debating the utility of alternative constructs." And yet. For others, of course, what I've already said will be far too much. For them I have abandoned truth (the intrinsic, non-human, arbitrating kind), trivialised knowledge (making it something like opinion) and become a nihilist (who doesn't care about anything but venting his mind and especially not the certainty which gives anything meaning). But mention of *meaning* is apposite. As this text has hopefully informed you.

4. The Future of the Historical Jesus

"The instant you speak about a thing, you miss the mark." - Zen Proverb

"We have art in order not to die of the truth." - Friedrich Nietzsche

"When all is said and done we look for the historical Jesus with our imaginations - and there too is where we find him if we find him at all." - Dale Allison

"In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa." - Hayden White

Introduction: Schweitzer Was Right

The Quest of the Historical Jesus continues but, in recent years, it seems to have lost its mojo and run out of force. The "big beasts" of the current phase of this discipline (N.T. Wright¹, John Dominic Crossan², Marcus Borg³, The Jesus Seminar⁴, E.P. Sanders⁵, Dale Allison⁶) gave us their influential major contributions to this body of research some years ago now. Having done so, they have felt the need to move on elsewhere and, in the case of the dear departed Borg and the Seminar's motive force, Robert Funk, to exit the stage

1 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, 1996) and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (SPCK, 2003). Wright publishes academically as N.T. Wright but often more popularly as Tom Wright.

2 John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of A Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (HarperCollins, 1991) and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperCollins, 1994).

3 Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), *Jesus: A New Vision* (Harper and Row, 1987) and *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Surprising Relevance of a Spiritual Revolutionary* (HarperCollins, 2006).

4 Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Polebridge Press, 1993 and HarperCollins, 1997), Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (Polebridge Press and HarperCollins, 1998).

5 E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (SCM Press, 1985) and *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin, 1993).

6 Dale Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Augsburg Fortress, 1998), *Resurrecting Jesus* (T and T Clark, 2005), *The Historical Christ and The Theological Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2009) and *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination and History* (Baker Academic, 2010).

completely (RIP). John P. Meier remains, of course, his *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus* project which began in 1991 is now, by 2016, up to fully five volumes and thousands of pages.⁷ The latest volume even comes to conclusions about the parables of Jesus that might seem to make the aforementioned Jesus Seminar into wild-eyed optimists. But this is not to restrict such research to “headline names” for, of course, in the underbelly of academia Historical Jesus Studies has probably never been more popular than it has in the last 25 years. Any number of books about Jesus, in historical context, are now written and some scholars, for example Bart Ehrman or Robert M. Price, seem to have turned writing about Jesus, from their point of view, into a mini industry.⁸

But there are further issues here which have lead increasingly to a seeming slowing down of impetus if not of industry. Firstly, we have no end of students being schooled in “The Quest” who write innumerable theses for higher degrees. These students then jostle for positions in the academy. The problem is that at this end of affairs, the end which is about retelling a now concretized narrative and regurgitating current wisdom, its all become a bit dull and lifeless. Is any new and vital (in the sense of alive) research actually taking place anymore or are we just repeating ourselves to satisfy pre-established audiences? Secondly, it must immediately be noted that now it is virtually impossible to be cognisant of all the relevant scholarly material on, and extant views about, Jesus. A recent “handbook” for historical Jesus study ran to four volumes and over 3,700 pages.⁹ That is some “handbook”! Anthologies of important and relevant

⁷ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus* (5 vols to date, Yale University Press, 1991-2016). Meier has now also passed away.

⁸ Bart D. Ehrman’s *Jesus Before The Gospels* (HarperOne, 2016) and Robert M. Price’s *Deconstructing Jesus* (Prometheus Books, 2000) are just random examples in this respect.

⁹ *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols., eds, Tom Holmén and Stanley Porter, Brill, 2011). It was also beyond the pocket of anyone but a millionaire or an institution.

entries to the Quest also often run to hundreds of pages alone.¹⁰ This is before we get to the book length treatments of single issues and the voluminous literature in journals and periodicals. Historical Jesus Studies even got its very own journal in 2003.¹¹ The historical Jesus scholar's task has never comprised of more material to work with and as the years pass the task of sifting the wheat from the chaff only grows more onerous.

All that said, when one looks at this now almost 250 year enterprise, should we accept Schweitzer's choice of Hermann Reimarus as the starting point, I believe that two major conclusions stand out. Incidentally, it is Albert Schweitzer with his *The Quest of The Historical Jesus*,¹² who sets out these two conclusions most plainly and forcefully. If you recall Schweitzer's book, and no one engaged in work on the Quest has any excuse not to have read the entire study, he concludes that:

1. Jesus was a deluded man trying to bring in the kingdom of God and that, therefore, Jewish eschatology is the key to understanding Jesus.¹³

2. Everyone studying Jesus found the Jesus they wanted to find.¹⁴

10 Some examples are *The Historical Jesus* (Critical Concepts in Religious Studies, Craig A. Evans, ed., 4 vols., Routledge, 2004) and *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research* (James D.G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, eds., Eisenbrauns, 2005).

11 This is the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* published by Brill.

12 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (First Complete Edition, SCM Press, 2000, from an original German edition in 1906). This book was updated by Schweitzer a few times in the original German.

13 Thus the force of Schweitzer's assertion that we have to reckon with an "unhistorical Jesus" who isn't eschatologically understood or a "too historical Jesus" who becomes historically relative. See *Quest*, p. 406 and, indeed, the argument of the whole book.

14 "Each individual created Jesus in accordance with his own character" is how Schweitzer phrases this specifically (*Quest*, p. 6). He continues that "There is no historical task which so reveals a man's (and, one imagines, a woman's) true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus." Its worth noting that so much is this a conclusion of Schweitzer's that he foregrounds it at the beginning of his book in the opening chapter.

What I find remarkable about these two assertions is that, 111 years after Schweitzer first made them, they are still very solidly entrenched within the field of historical Jesus work. I mean to say here that scholarship since Schweitzer's *Quest* has, neither in one fell swoop nor cumulatively, been able to do away with either conclusion. People have tried, of course. The whole Bultmannian and post-Bultmannian tendency in New Testament scholarship was, depending on your point of view, an effort to do away with the first in all its historical force, relegating it to an existential idea.¹⁵ The second, as I explained in a previous chapter of this book, is often remarked upon in the most clichéd fashion... only to be regarded as some kind of phantom problem. We close our eyes and imagine it has gone away, the ghost of subjectivity wasn't real in any meaningful sense after all.¹⁶ But Schweitzer was quite clear and he gives us no room for manoeuvre. Yet I think he could have expressed it better. It is not so much that "everyone finds the Jesus that they want to find" so much as that everyone finds a Jesus *that they can use*. The one thing Jesus must never be is irrelevant (except where his irrelevance is simultaneously of use).

The Quest in recent times has come to be categorized by some as a matter of Old, New and Third Quest types. See, for example, the recent *Guide for the Perplexed* by Helen K. Bond¹⁷ although this scheme is repeated in other places as well.¹⁸ However, along with the likes of Dale Allison, Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh, I find this linear arrangement simplistic at best and facile at worst.¹⁹ The supposed contemporary

¹⁵ See Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and The Word* (Charles Scribner's Sons 1934 and 1958) and *History and Eschatology* (Harper, 1955).

¹⁶ So most of the commentary on this in *Whose Historical Jesus?* (William Arnal and Michel Desjardins, eds., Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Helen K. Bond, *The Historical Jesus: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T and T Clark, 2012).

¹⁸ As, for example, in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright's *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (OUP, 1988).

¹⁹ These objections are raised by Allison on pp.1-26 of *Resurrecting Jesus*, by Maurice Casey in his *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (T and T Clark, 2010), pp. 1-59, and by Clive Marsh in two very important essays, "Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective" in *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (4) from 1997 and "Diverse Agendas At Work in The Jesus Quest," in *Handbook For The Study of The Historical Jesus*, pp. 985-1020.

interests of current “Third” Questers, primarily a concentration on a thoroughly and authentically Jewish Galilean Jesus, are not so much distinctives of a period in time as badges of honour certain scholars claim for themselves. In a post-Holocaust period of increasing political sensitivity what could be more contemporary than an appreciation that Jesus was actually a Jew? It is, thus, noteworthy that when other pictures of Jesus are given, such as the “cynic Jewish peasant” of Crossan, some accuse him of de-judaizing Jesus.²⁰ It seems that the implicit criticism here is not just of an image of Jesus but of a certain view of Jews and Judaism itself. The problem here, in an historical sense, however, is that even if in the current period scholars have wanted to focus all their attentions on creating Jesus as a viable Jewish character of the 1st century they have always seemed to miss the required precision. Jesus becomes a Jewish everyman for we lack the data to be specific about him. We describe a time and a place but the evidence rarely, if ever, takes us directly to him.

This, in turn, makes us recoil. We ask ourselves what about our pictures of Jesus is truly historical. We recognise that to build a narrative in our contemporary moment in which “history as narrative” is regarded as not that far removed from the speculative historical novel or, worse, as fiction, puts the historical scholar, something many insist they are, under pressure. Questers from Renan to Crossan and Wright have been writing historical narratives that they expect us to accept both as history and as story. So there is a sense in which we have to accept not merely the historical postulates but the context of meaning that such scholars provide as well. This is to say that often it is not merely historical facts that we are asked to accept but we are pushed towards accepting complexes of meaning too. For example, if one reads N.T. Wright’s *The Resurrection of*

20 Maurice Casey in the opening chapter of *Jesus of Nazareth* being an example: “The overall result of (Crossan’s) process has the same social function as most scholarship on the Jesus of history: it reduces his Jewishness” (p. 20).

The Son of God, which Wright insists is a historical book about matters that historians can and should investigate, we are asked to accept both that there was, historically, an empty tomb and actual appearances of the risen Jesus. But we are then told, in the same book as part of an historical argument, that these facts are both the sufficient and necessary conditions for the rise of Christianity and so also for Christian belief. We are offered a “both/and” not an “either/or,” historical facts and historical (yet also contemporary) meaning as a single historically mediated package deal.²¹ Yet the question remains, in the context of the Quest, whether the Quest itself is historical merely in historiographical senses, as historical narratives, as form, or whether it is ever anything more than this. Is it enough to make up historical stories by joining assorted historical flotsam and jetsam together into a meaningful tale?

And this brings us to the criteria for historical Jesus research which, in the 21st century, have suffered something of a going over.²² There are now several scholars who will openly say that they regard the traditional historical criteria, such as coherence, dissimilarity, embarrassment, multiple attestation and the like, as basically useless. Dale Allison, for example, made this point most forcefully and convincingly back in 1998 in his first Jesus book, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* and has continued to since.²³ Yet others, such as E.P. Sanders, took the route of starting with what they regarded as historical facts and going from there instead.²⁴ N.T. Wright nods in the general direction of criteria yet his more important one seems to be that his Jesus fit into a particular

21 One needs to get to the meat in pp. 587-738 of *The Resurrection of the Son of God* for this.

22 Examples of this are *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 13.1 (2015), the entire first volume of *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* and *Jesus, Criteria and the Demise of Authenticity* (Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., Bloomsbury T and T Clark, 2012).

23 *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 1-77, is a tightly argued essay on criteria and the Quest which should be regarded as foundational to the discipline.

24 See *Jesus and Judaism* and *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.

story he (or perhaps God himself) is telling about "Israel's God".²⁵ Overall, it seems that there has been something of a reassessment of these things in the light of a contemporary hand-wringing about the "subjectivity" of historical Jesus study. This reveals not only the philosophical basis many imagine they undertake the Quest on the basis of (a realist, positivist one in which there is only one truth to find) but also that the traditional criteria were always mute tools that could not protest in the hands of those who used them to begin with.

Here we may note, of course, that things such as the coherence or dissimilarity of textual material are not things which judge themselves. They are matters of human judgment which means they are subject to the needs and agendas of their users (as well as requiring a comprehensive database we arguably do not even have). Multiple attestation, a criterion that some find more reliable, does not escape such subjective fudging either for someone has to decide that something is, indeed, multiply attested in a relevant way. In the context of the historical Jesus guild of scholars which, as with society in general, has increasingly fractured into self-contained units pursuing their own interests in Jesus research, such criteria are no longer controls on historical Jesus study so much as methodological justifications or tools to be used as points of argumentation. Such, indeed, seems to be John Dominic Crossan's much vaunted stratigraphy and methodology which has been picked apart by many since it appeared in his *The Historical Jesus* back in 1991 and which he seemingly took up in an effort to slay the dragon of "autobiography as biography" in his own work.²⁶ But it didn't work. Those reading

25 "Story" or "narrative" permeates Wright's outlook on Christian origins generally and has been explicit in his "Christian Origins and the Question of God" series of which *Jesus and the Victory of God* and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* have been a part. Wright's explanation for this is found in part one of the project, See *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, 1992), pp. 31-144.

26 Allison's opening chapter in *Jesus of Nazareth* is a focused example of this which completely disarms Crossan's methods.

Crossan's historical works have been plainly able to see Crossan's own commitments and concerns just as plainly as those of the cynic Jewish peasant he has attempted to reconstruct.²⁷ The methods were justifications not controls. Many now are saying that this isn't a problem merely for Crossan: its a conclusion applicable to the whole discipline. *There are methods but no controls.*

This becomes a dark night of the soul for historical Jesus scholars who stand accused of telling historical stories about a man called Jesus who was a 1st century Galilean Jew. It is not that they were stories. It is not even that they were histories. It is that they weren't particularly objective or controlled by things outside of the scholar constructing them which reveals the essentially philosophical nature of the problem in a world where too many scholars think history is a kind of science and that science is penetrating to what is the nature of the case. Here the difference between construction and reconstruction becomes much narrower than many historical Jesus scholars would feel comfortable with. Schweitzer, naturally, would have insisted that non-eschatological portraits were ruled out by history itself but even that judgment leaves the field open to numerous uncontrolled conjectures at a juncture when historical Jesus studies itself seems to have reached a point where controls, or the almost total lack of them, seems to be precisely the problem.

Here the outside observer may once again reflect on the spear that is always being nudged so gently into the side of historical Jesus scholarship, its proclivity to subjectivity, to telling historical stories that function equally well as contemporary ones.

²⁷ Crossan's essay "Eschatology, Apocalypticism, and the Historical Jesus" in *Jesus Then and Now: Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (eds. Marvin Meyer and Charles Hughes, Trinity Press International, 2001), pp. 91-112 is a good example of this, especially the section which reads: "our very humanity demands that we reject definitively the lure of a violent ultimacy, a violent transcendence, or a violent God. If, on the other hand, we sincerely believe in a violent God, we must surely follow openly the advice of Mrs Job: Curse God and die" (pp. 97-98). Here Crossan himself is *personally* against any "apocalyptic" agenda. As is his historical Jesus.

Or, as Crossan informed us, of doing autobiography and calling it biography. Here, in the face of mumbled, if not shouted, protests from the guild of historical Jesus scholars I remind you that the charge is not that these scholars find who they wanted to find. Rather, they find a person they can use. And its often not even that difficult (for others) to see. In this respect the attention that memory and memory studies have received in recent historical Jesus work (such as in books by James Dunn, his student Anthony Le Donne, Dale Allison and Ken McIver, as well as an essay by Terrence Tilley)²⁸ has been yet another attempt to reign in the all too apparent subjectivity. But it hasn't worked and Schweitzer's conclusion still stands.

It seems to me that this conclusion now stands in need of a better answer than the half-embarrassed and half-ignored one it, in the more than a century since Schweitzer first affixed his charge to the cross upon which historical Jesus scholarship now hangs, has received. This will no doubt require a good deal more self-effacing honesty than much historical Jesus work has yet demonstrated itself capable of. It will, without doubt, include addressing numerous shibboleths in the guild of historical Jesus scholarship including, but not reducible to, the idea that history is an imaginative art and not a science, that the literature historical Jesus scholars provide on Jesus carries meanings which may not be historical and that "the historical Jesus" as an idea is, as Schweitzer has already suggested, not something with which we can have much to do because Jesus is not merely a less sophisticated and historically particular version of us.²⁹

²⁸ In the 21st century "memory" and memory studies has been a burgeoning area of study explored by some historical Jesus scholars in order to anchor their images of Jesus to a plausible past. The items I mention are James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making, Volume 1, Eerdmans, 2003), a book in which the title itself wants to anchor that link in our minds, Anthony Le Donne, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Eerdmans, 2011), Dale Allison's *Constructing Jesus*, especially its opening chapter, and Ken McIver's *Memory, Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). Many chapters of the aforementioned *Jesus, Criteria and the Demise of Authenticity* are also relevant as they are written by proponents of this memory approach. See also Terrence Tilley, "Remembering the Historic Jesus: A New Research Program?" in *Theological Studies* 68 (2007), pp. 3-35.

²⁹ Indeed, he is "to our time a stranger and an enigma", *Quest*, p. 478.

So we must, in the end, reckon with the very Schweitzerian idea that we cannot be resuscitators of Jesus' body at a 2,000 year remove. Historical Jesus scholarship as a whole, as a 250 year, post-Enlightenment and historically particular enterprise, stands accused of being an academic act of looking in the mirror. And it doesn't seem as if it even has much of a defence in light of the accusation. Like Mark's Jesus before Pilate, it simply murmurs, "If you say so" and then avers from further discussion of the subject,³⁰ meekly accepting its crucifixion on the cross of subjectivity yet seeing it as a symbolic victory and testimony to some overarching objective truth it still refuses to let go of. I ask, will this do? I suggest it won't and so, in the rest of this essay, I intend to discuss the Quest's subjectivity, focusing on recent scholars and studies which demonstrate the issue in contemporary context, and to discuss the apparent controls which are argued for that, so we are told, stop us slipping into the quicksand of intellectual masturbation. Thereafter, I will move to a reconfigured idea of what the Quest itself as a whole is actually about. It is hoped that such honesty can finally allow the historical Jesus to escape his earthly prisons of ideological writing in books and rise once more as poetry and play, unfettered by a history that never was more than the exercise of the human imagination anyway. For it really is true, as Zen Buddhists realise, that "The instant you speak about a thing, you miss the mark."

The Subjective Quest

Where to begin? Perhaps with two scholars who are not simply subjective in their views but openly apologetic in their intentions. The first is the Roman Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson who, technically speaking, isn't a Quester at all. So why is he here? He is here because he wrote a book about "the real Jesus" and he didn't mean the historical

³⁰ Mark 15: 2-5.

one, something which irked some Questers enough that they had to respond.³¹ In fact, Johnson basically wished a plague on the houses of all those who thought that a search for the Jesus of history was even necessary. Perhaps this was the sense of his subtitle “the misguided quest for the historical Jesus and the truth of the historical gospels,” something that wouldn’t have been out of place in the late 1800s.³² Johnson’s attack on the entire Quest is basically at the level of its founding premise, to see if the Jesus of history was the man portrayed in the gospels or not. Johnson, a good Catholic, thinks he was and he also doesn’t think that history catches the “reality” of Jesus in any genuine sense. This is the realm of a living faith. And then he thinks that should be it. We don’t need mere scholars who use history as their guide thinking that they can undermine faith based on gospels (not to mention “the Gospel”) by creating a historiographical gap between the one and the other. “To read these compositions in terms simply of the historical information they provide,” Johnson writes, “is to miss the most important and most explicit insight they offer the reader, namely, how the experience of the powerful transforming power of God that came through the crucified Messiah Jesus created not only a new understanding of who Jesus was but, simultaneously, a new understanding of God and God’s way with the world.”³³ So that’s that then. To understand Jesus you need faith and history is regarded as but “information”.

31 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (HarperCollins, 1996). Noteworthy responses are Walter Wink, “Response to Luke Timothy Johnson’s *The Real Jesus*” in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 7 (1997), pp. 233-248, and two articles by Robert J. Miller, “The Jesus of Orthodoxy and the Jesuses of the Gospels: A Critique of Luke Timothy Johnson’s *The Real Jesus*” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68 (1997), pp. 101-120, and “History is Not Optional: A Response to *The Real Jesus* by Luke Timothy Johnson” in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1) (1998), pp. 27-34. Wider context on Johnson’s views can be found in a collected volume of his essays, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 146, Brill, 2013), where he not only addresses the Quest again but also N.T. Wright specifically, Wright being someone who had initially supplied a quote for the cover of *The Real Jesus* but had then subsequently backed off in his support of Johnson’s views. Wright, of course, very much sees the need for both history and theology in a way that Johnson does not.

32 The obvious comparison is Martin Kähler’s *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* originally published in German in 1892.

33 *The Real Jesus*, pp. 173-174.

A second apologist we may note is Gary Habermas. Habermas, who was educated at liberal institutions, is now Distinguished Professor of Apologetics and Philosophy at Liberty University (“training champions for Christ since 1971”), a private Christian institution initially founded by Jerry Falwell Sr in Lynchburg, Virginia. Habermas’ personal website³⁴ states at the top that he specialises in “Resurrection of Jesus research” and offers readers a “free e-book” with the title *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ Amongst The Major World Religions*. In general terms Habermas writes books in defence of miracles, the life of Jesus as written in the gospels and concerning the historical truth of the resurrection. However, in all of this his argumentation usually comes down to a simple preference for believing the truth of the canonical gospel accounts which, as with Johnson, is simply a refusal to ask the questions the likes of Reimarus were asking in the first place when they questioned the Jesus described in them.³⁵

However, unlike Johnson, Habermas conceives of himself as taking part in the Quest. Its just that with Habermas he argues that the gospels are coherent, meaningful and truthful history whereas Johnson downplays history as meaningful for faith. None of this might matter and we could detach Habermas from a scholarly engagement with the Quest, properly describing what he does as faith-based apologetics, except for two things. First, Habermas is referenced by a genuine Quester, N. T. Wright, in his scholarly work³⁶ and has also been published in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*.³⁷ Second, Habermas is but the more obviously apologetic, leading edge of an evangelical “Quest” which is not out to demonstrate any history as such but to argue that an evangelical position on certain “historical facts become narrative” mandates an

³⁴ www.garyhabermas.com

³⁵ On Reimarus see C. H. Talbert (ed.), *Reimarus: Fragments*, (translated by Ralph S. Fraser, Fortress, 1970).

³⁶ Four references are listed in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by Wright.

³⁷ Gary R. Habermas, “Resurrection Research From 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?” in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3.2 (2005), pp. 135-153.

evangelical position on Jesus with all that they believe that entails.³⁸ One question one need not ask of such scholarship is if the conclusions were ever in any doubt. Not, of course, that this is something unique to evangelical Christians.

British biblical scholar Maurice Casey was one of those to note this in an enlightening chapter from his 2010 book, *Jesus of Nazareth*.³⁹ The opening chapter of the book is his own precis of the Quest in which he disavows the judgment of others who have seen the history of the Quest according to the Old-No-New-Third scheme and accuses many in the Quest, not least in its contemporary form, of being prey to a “cultural circle” and being victims of their own cultural locations. Most obviously here we find Christian scholars of any kind indicted and Casey indeed indicts John Dominic Crossan, Tom Wright, James Dunn, John P. Meier, Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, and Ben Witherington III amongst others. Casey also highlights that much of the modern Quest is played out against the backdrop of a modern culture war based firmly within the USA. Thus, Casey refers to the Jesus Seminar as the “American Jesus Seminar” and cites this body within the context of this culture war in which the Seminar and its conservative and fundamentalist Christian critics are locked in a publicity war over images of Jesus with the general public as the audience being fought for. Casey argues that the Jesus Seminar has achieved the opposite of what it hoped for, the success of a liberal picture of Jesus as a sage or teacher of wisdom, in that it has rather encouraged conservatives “to imagine that all their dogmatism is right”.⁴⁰ He notes that, in this war, to prove the other side wrong is often regarded as the purpose of debate (and a mountain of publishing)

³⁸ Examples of this phenomenon are Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest* (IVP Press, 1997), Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Eerdmans, 1999), Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 2009), Craig A. Evans *Fabricating Jesus* (IVP, 2008) and Darrell L. Bock with Benjamin I. Simpson, *Jesus The God-Man: The Unity and Diversity of the Gospel Portrayals* (Baker Academic, 2016). There are countless more.

³⁹ *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 1-59.

⁴⁰ *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 22.

rather than any interest in historical work *per se*.⁴¹ Hence there are any number of apologetic conservative Christian books (many of which are by genuine conservative Christian scholars with Christian commitments and seminary posts) which set out simply to refute the claims of more liberal scholars for apologetic reasons. Casey describes this context for study as going “from bad to worse”.⁴²

Casey himself says that he carries no religious commitment either for or against and so when he suggests that the Quest in general suffers from the religious convictions of those taking part (mostly Christian but sometimes atheist) we can understand why. He also criticises the modern Quest for its lack of interest in the Aramaic sources behind the gospels and any reconstructions of things Jesus might have said in Aramaic himself which, as Casey repeats more than once, is the language that Jesus himself spoke. The study of Aramaic sources for the gospels and for sayings of Jesus was one major focus of Casey’s own scholarship before his sad death in 2014 and one that his own Jesus book benefits from greatly.⁴³ Sadly, Casey notes, most current researchers in historical Jesus studies are either completely unqualified for such a task or choose to neglect or ignore it and are, thus, hampered by their own ignorance which reflects on Jesus scholarship as a whole. Casey is, however, one of those contemporary Questers for whom a proper siting in first century Judaism is essential for a genuine historical Jesus to emerge. Thus, he is one of those who accuses Crossan of essentially dejudaizing Jesus by giving him a Cynic caste and who praises Geza Vermes and E.P. Sanders for giving us thoroughly Jewish

41 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 21: ““The effect of the American Jesus Seminar on conservative American Christians has been just as disastrous as the work of Seminar itself. Some of them write books which appear to assume that, if they can demonstrate that the Jesus Seminar is wrong, they thereby demonstrate the absolute truth of Protestant fundamentalism or Catholic orthodoxy, whichever the perspective from which the author is writing.”

42 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 21.

43 Examples are *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 102, Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *An Aramaic Approach to Q: Sources for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 122, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Jesuses.⁴⁴ All too often, however, Casey has diagnosed throughout the history of the Quest an attitude of superiority from Christian interpreters towards Judaism and Jesus as a Jew, a superiority which leads to them filling in the blanks in their knowledge with Christianisms and gives a certain inevitability to their scholarly conclusions. It is all too easy to show that Casey's criticisms here have teeth and that they stick. His first chapter in *Jesus of Nazareth* refers to multiple examples.

At this point the thoughtful scholar needs to muse on the fact that a branch of biblical scholarship, the Quest of the Historical Jesus, is mostly carried out with explicit Christian commitments (of whatever flavour) fully intact. One also needs to ask how such a fact might affect the methods and results of the Quest. For example, it goes without saying that most scholars in the Quest have a pre-requisite need for Jesus to have existed at all and to be an historical figure of meaning and purpose. Yet these are not insignificant things to be carrying into academic study and it should be recognised that many of the major lives of Jesus we see constructed today, such as those of Wright, Dunn, Sanders, Crossan, Borg, Allison and others, were ALL created by men of explicit Christian commitment. We can speak, with some justification, of the predetermined nature of these constructions and legitimately inquire as to their relation to the beliefs of those doing the constructing and what Christian theology, values or beliefs they are seeking to smuggle in or protect with their constructions. This is not even to argue that studies such as these have necessarily been inaccurate or misleading in their conclusions or argumentation (although none of them are exactly the same and most have at least

44 The contribution of E.P. Sanders has already been referenced in this essay but it is also pertinent to note his *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE - 66 CE* which is a standard reference work on Judaism of the period. Geza Vermes was one of the major scholars of the 20th century on Judaism at the time of Jesus and the surrounding period, particularly in relation to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and was Jewish himself. He wrote several books on the historical Jesus in Jewish context, beginning with *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Fortress, 1973) and including *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Fortress, 1983), *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Fortress, 1993) and *Jesus in his Jewish Context* (Fortress, 2003). One cannot read Vermes on Jesus and imagine him as anything other than Jewish.

something important to say). It is to argue that the prior commitments of such people (as with their opposites or, indeed, any others) are both real and determinative. One cannot, as is so often the case, speak of commitments but then act as if they have zero effect.⁴⁵ Such dishonesty and self-deception is rife in the Quest and the failure to see historical conclusions as the outcome of historically formulated preconditions is endemic in its operation. Maurice Casey, an “independent historian” according to the subtitle of his book, was one scholar who would likely agree with such an assessment for this is the force of the second sentence of his book which addresses Jesus: “Most of us belong to social subgroups which have a definite view of him.”⁴⁶ It is unlikely and duplicitous to argue that such views will be subsequently ignored or that they will be deactivated during scholarly inquiries.

At this point we must reckon with Anthony Le Donne’s short but very concentrated book, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know And How Can We Know It?* (mentioned above) which claims even to inveigle readers in the messy subject of postmodern history,⁴⁷ a subject many historical Jesus Questers would recoil from at even the mention of the name. (I suspect that many of these would not even really know why either since few would have actually made any genuine attempt to understand it and so would

45 This is the conclusion I take away from so many discussions of “commitments” or “bias” found in historical Jesus context. A paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is *Whose Historical Jesus?* (eds. William Arnal and Michel Desjardins, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997).

46 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 1.

47 Relevant texts on “postmodern history” include Frank R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (Nijhoff, 1983), *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (University of California Press, 1994), *Historical Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2001), *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford University Press, 2005), F.R. Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History* (Reaktion Books, 1995); Keith Jenkins, *On ‘What is History?’: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (Routledge, 1995), *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (Routledge, 2003); Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (Routledge, 1997), *The New History* (Longman, 2003); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). Add to this list the anthologies by Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (Routledge, 1997) and Jenkins and Munslow (eds.) *The Nature of History Reader* (Routledge, 2004).

completely inappropriate and falsely characterize it. Such people likely cross themselves at the mention of Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard and even Hayden White as well.) In this respect it is very important that Le Donne begins his book not with statements about the life of Jesus but by noting that “the conscientious historian must begin with a philosophical framework. The historian must have some working theory of the nature of history - what it is, what it isn't, what we bring to the task, and what to expect from it.”⁴⁸ These will all, necessarily, be personal yet social constructions, ways that we as human inquirers in a social context configure what it is we think we are doing and why. But Le Donne goes further than this and so questions such as he has about the nature of inquiry, questions like “To what extent do we perceive what we expect to perceive?” and “How much creativity is required to remember what we’ve perceived?”⁴⁹ are important as well, and, as far as I’m concerned, important as subjective aspects of any human inquiry. File under “things you cannot avoid if you consider yourself a human being”.

Le Donne goes on to argue, in ways he considers postmodern, that history is a matter of memory. Memory, he suggests, is something that is always interpretive, “an ongoing process of imaginative reinforcement.” And so “we are active participants in the shaping of our memories.”⁵⁰ Le Donne also argues that history is interpretive too meaning that Le Donne considers that history is *the interpretation of interpretations*. So Le Donne can now argue that “The storytellers behind the gospels are interpreters by discipline. In telling the Jesus story they interpret, revise, metaphorize, theologize, apply typologies, highlight character developments and plot movements. These are not things they do because they had little care for history. This is what telling history looks like - what it

⁴⁸ *Historical Jesus*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *Historical Jesus*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Historical Jesus*, p. 32.

ought to look like!”⁵¹ Le Donne also quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson with favour when he says that “people can only see what they are prepared to see,” suggesting that the inevitable perspectival pictures historical Jesus scholars have of Jesus (not to mention gospel writers) are not so much conscious choices as the inevitable consequences of being human beings, beings without a totalizing view of, well, anything at all. It is not just that human beings have subjective preferences or that memory as a kind of human thought is interpretive, they were made that way. Subjectivity, in this sense, is what even enables a human being to inquire at all. Le Donne himself arrives at a similar position by way of Schleiermacher’s “hermeneutical circle”, Dilthey’s “all understanding always remains relative” and Heidegger’s recognition that “Any interpretation which is to contribute to understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted.”⁵² The point here is that human subjectivity (call it “interpretation” if you prefer) in perception and in memory is not a weakness. It is what makes such things possible at all. We were not made to simply trawl for undifferentiated and useless knowledge but to actively filter, imagine and interpret for knowledge thought useful to us in the first place (so Nietzsche and Rorty in my last chapter). In this sense all knowledge is for us meaningful knowledge, knowledge which has been about recycling memories, perceptions and understandings we already have. Continually.

So when Le Donne goes on to argue, contrary to the hopes of Textual Criticism and certainly in the case of some of its participants, that there is no “original story of Jesus” to find, for example in any original manuscript, because the stories of Jesus are memories passed on by an ever-flexible culture of oral retelling which *precedes* any notion of an authoritative written tale, this makes perfect sense. But this precludes any

⁵¹ *Historical Jesus*, p. 40.

⁵² *Historical Jesus*, p. 56-64.

modern or scientific notion of “certainty” or what Le Donne refers to as “the mirage of objectivity”⁵³ and we must always remember that “Perspective and interpretation are the very basis for memory’s existence.”⁵⁴ Thus, Le Donne finds himself agreeing with postmodern historian Hayden White that “historians make decisions that essentially create stories,”⁵⁵ something which has consequences for both Jesus historians and gospel composers. Yet Le Donne’s book, which has really functioned as but a primer for these theories of history as memory as interpretation, lacks the theoretical and philosophical underpinning that White’s own postmodern historiographical writing does. In particular, White speaks in *Tropics of Discourse* about the historian’s “conceptual apparatus (without which atomic facts cannot be aggregated into complex macrostructures and constituted as objects of discursive representation in a historical narrative)”.⁵⁶ His argument here is that there is no firm line between the doing of history and the doing of philosophy of history. So:

“Those historians who draw a firm line between history and philosophy of history fail to recognize that every historical discourse contains within it a full-blown, if only implicit, philosophy of history. And this is as true of what is conventionally called narrative (or diachronic) historiography as it is of conceptual (or synchronic) historical representation. The principal difference between history and philosophy of history is that the latter brings the conceptual apparatus by which the facts are ordered in the discourse to the surface of the text, while history proper (as it is called) buries it in the interior of the narrative, where it serves as a hidden or implicit shaping device.”⁵⁷

⁵³ *Historical Jesus*, p. 76.

⁵⁴ *Historical Jesus*, p. 107.

⁵⁵ *Historical Jesus*, p. 113.

⁵⁶ *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 126.

⁵⁷ *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 127.

In this, the point at which White and Le Donne agree is that historians are active subjects who shape their (hi)stories. They can't be anything else because human perception itself is interpretive. And so we come to see the sense in Alun Munslow's statement that "This means we would do well to recognise and remember that the histories we assign to things and people are composed, created, constituted, constructed and always situated literatures." History is not the same as "the past". It is a narrative interpretation of the past or, as Munslow notes again, "history is first and foremost a literary narrative about the past, a literary composition of the data into a narrative where the historian creates a meaning for the past."⁵⁸ As such, history is a story about the past constructed by subjective interpretation. So history is not a matter of correspondence in the positivist sense that many past Jesus historians have taken it to be. This approach is a mistake from start to finish simply in that it mischaracterises human activity and so the inquiry as a whole. This is likely because, for many, there is still a lingering notion that history is analogous to seeing. You look at something and there it is, immediately perspicuous to us in all its glory. The problem with this, as Le Donne shows, is that the very act of seeing is an act which involves the one doing the seeing in social conceptions of how seeing works, what we might and might not expect to see and many other things. There is, to put it bluntly, interpretation all the way down and without any hope of escaping this conclusion or its consequences. As British postmodern historian Keith Jenkins phrases this, history is "a theoretical, speculative experiment 'all the way down'." Another way Jenkins puts this is that "history is in the main what historians make".⁵⁹ Yet he further formulates this as a working idea:

⁵⁸ Munslow was writing in the preface to the Routledge Classics Edition of Keith Jenkins' *Rethinking History* (Routledge, 2003). This was originally published in 1991.

⁵⁹ *Rethinking History*, p. 31.

*"History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognisable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum."*⁶⁰

This definition, once again, lines us up with Casey's description of liberal vs conservative culture wars of a distinctly American flavour, wars which overflow into historical Jesus study, diverting the Quest from a pursuit of history to a quest to win arguments in public and make the other side look bad. It may well be that the Quest has always been a partly polemical exercise and, if so, the contemporary stages of it are playing their part. That being the case, I would add to it here by noting that all that has been said here amounts to the conclusion that there is no fact/interpretation distinction to be made in history. All facts, to be of any use, are already interpretations and interpretations are what we, naively or otherwise, have designated facts. This is to say that:

"it is never really a matter of the facts per se but the weight, position, combination and significance they carry vis-à-vis each other in the construction of explanations that is at issue. This is the inevitable interpretive dimension, the problematic, as historians transform the events of the past into patterns of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce. For although there may be methods of finding out 'what

⁶⁰ *Rethinking History*, p. 31-32.

*happened' there is no method whatsoever whereby one can definitely say what the 'facts' mean."*⁶¹

This mention of meaning is pertinent for I have recently argued in my own Jesus work that meaning is the primary category when interacting with what is today the profound and pervasive cultural symbol of Jesus.⁶² It might be thought here that historical Jesus study acts as a control on subjectivity and, to an extent, I believe it does - if only because of the diversity and positionality of so many inquiries into the historical Jesus. (Yes, that's right, this diversity actually helps, at least in one respect.) In this, of course, I take my cue from an American pragmatist conception of democracy and inquiry in which conversation partners, properly and honestly interacted with, can only help the collective as a whole.⁶³ Differing points of view, an authentic intersubjectivity, should help you sharpen, or abandon, your own points of view, in other words, providing you are an honest and conscientious inquirer who recognises weaknesses and problematics in their own historical understandings.

Yet this is not totally convincing and throughout the writing of this section of my essay I have felt the menacing presence of Jean Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra," the notion that "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it."⁶⁴ The territory here is Jesus and the map is our constructions. They are not the same thing. A question we must always be asking, and a distinction we must always be making, is to ask if we have the territory or the map. Or if the territory was ever available. Or if we have a

⁶¹ *Rethinking History*, p. 40.

⁶² See chapters 2+3 of this book.

⁶³ I get this point from Richard Rorty and he claims to have learnt it from John Dewey. Compare Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) with John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (The Free Press, 1997, originally 1916.)

⁶⁴ This, of course, is from Jean Baudrillard's now infamous text *Simulacra and Simulation* (The Body in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism, University of Michigan Press, 1994). French original 1981.

map which we now *impose* upon the territory such that we don't need the territory anymore. Or to ask about the relationship between maps and territories. This is one reason why I think that recent configurations of history as memory are not completely convincing, especially if they function as catch all (and semi-scientific) methods to rescue a history that some (often conservative) scholars have found themselves increasingly unable to justify and increasingly exposed as "mere beliefs". There can be no easy recourse to "memory" and theories of how memory works (and the oral culture that goes with it) which serve to end up justifying conservative positions all over again but by the new, trendy and contemporary means of "memory research". We must all always reckon with the notion that we are simulators trying to make "the real" coincide with our simulations or even that simulation is all we have.⁶⁵ Method alone can never secure results. "Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself - such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance."⁶⁶

Methods But No Controls

We start with a statement that every Jesus Quester can agree with: Jesus himself wrote no gospel. Everyone would regard this as true yet many would still read the gospels as if it didn't matter. Perhaps they might argue for the essential reliability of oral traditions, necessary to take us from the life of Jesus to a time when people do write things down about him, or even, in some cases, would be working with notions of gospel inerrancy or even infallibility in their heads. But what would all this reliability, inerrancy and infallibility be about? Jesus himself wrote no gospel. So nothing here is from the horse's

⁶⁵ This is the prospect I tease in *Jesus in Pragmatist Focus*.

⁶⁶ *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 2.

mouth. The closest anyone could argue that any gospel material comes to speaking about Jesus is in their remembrances and impressions of him. At this point it may be retorted that most people would argue that at least some of this material in the gospels is original to Jesus and that may well be true. But this is the point, once more, to reiterate what was being said in the subjectivity section of this essay. The gospels, as examples of history writing, were written down using creative subjectivity throughout. So even if, when we come to discuss criteria of authenticity directly, we could argue that such criteria, used in a certain way, were absolutely guaranteed to give us a solid bedrock of sayings and deeds of Jesus (and no one does!), neither these same criteria, nor any others we could imagine, would ever tell us how to fit them together or extract from them what Jesus thought he was doing and why. They would not, in short, give us the meaning. This meaning, which most would argue to be a vital part of any history, is something that only Jesus himself could give. What we have is what others take Jesus to mean and in that they may accord with Jesus and they may not. If we had a gospel written by Jesus himself we could compare. But we don't. Jesus himself wrote no gospel.

Many will want to argue against this, not least those who write lives of Jesus and synthesize material in order to come up with their grand schemes, putting forward what, as far as they are concerned, Jesus was all about from his point of view. But it is a legitimate historical question to ask if we actually have been given Jesus' point of view in gospel texts at all. We have certainly been given the point of view of certain Christian gospel writers. Some of these views have later been canonised. But none of these are from the horse's mouth. This is important when one remembers why the Quest of the Historical Jesus even exists because this Quest has been motivated from the start to be suspicious of the motives of Christian writers and their subjective imposition of meaning

through narrative upon the Jesus depicted in their stories. The Quest is there to look for differences between the *literary characters* called Jesus and the *historical individual* called Jesus.

For some, this is reason enough to be suspicious of the Quest itself as a whole and it comes to be seen as a negative, suspicious and critical (in the bad sense) enterprise. But the Quest does not exist to validate the literary creations of Christians. It is not called “The Quest of Gospel Validation”. It is the Quest of an historical character, the attempt to distinguish an historical character from literary creations about him. In this, Christian gospels may indeed be helpful because witnesses, whether right or wrong about the things they witness, can still provide useful contextual information. But it is not the job of a serious Quester to take what they say as read or to be naive synthesists of material simply because it is there. It is because the critical (in the good sense) impetus of the Quest has recognised this that criteria of authenticity were developed in the first place, criteria which searched for a Jesus who was not yet Christianised and subject to the creative subjectivity and the subjective narratives of others. As Quester Dale Allison has formulated this in the opening chapter of his book *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, a chapter that is a must read regarding matters methodological, “Dozens of ancient sources tell us what Jesus supposedly said and did. But what did he really say and what did he really do?”⁶⁷ We seek the “unvarnished” Jesus not the varnished one.

Once you start to distinguish between a varnished and unvarnished (but never unsubjective) Jesus you realise that you need some means to do this and these are the various criteria that scholars have developed over time for this purpose. The four major criteria historically have been the textual criteria of coherence, dissimilarity,

⁶⁷ *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 1.

embarrassment and multiple attestation. In addition, sometimes scholars try to devise new ones such as when German scholars Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter argued for a “criterion of historical plausibility”.⁶⁸ But immediately, and rather obviously, we can see problems here. “Coherence” or “dissimilarity” are matters of interpretation not objective fact (even if we thought “objective fact” was a philosophical possibility which I don’t). They also need huge databases to be reliable, something it is argued we do not have. Embarrassment, as a criterion we can reliably use, stumbles over the fact that all the potential embarrassments will not be so embarrassing that they have been left out of our source texts. That something has multiple attestation in different sources doesn’t actually mean its historical fact. It means more immediately that different sources find a similar thing useful *without* establishing their source. As for Theissen and Winter’s “historical plausibility”, well, that something is historically plausible doesn’t even mean (or establish) that it happened. Much less does it mean that Jesus said or did it. When working with texts, as historical Jesus researchers are, it is always wise to remember that “we can always... find tensions or contradictions between two texts.”⁶⁹ Its also worth remembering, again, that gospels are creatively subjective documents and that even where words of Jesus are used they are used to accord with their own creative purposes, thus recontextualising the sense. It might come to seem like we are looking for blue pieces of a puzzle... but where all the puzzle is blue. Certainly Dale Allison seems on point when he notes that, “If our tools were designed to overcome subjectivity and bring order to our discipline then they have failed.”⁷⁰

68 See Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002). German original 1997.

69 Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 3.

70 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 6.

It is here that I think Dale Allison makes a statement that the methodologically inclined should take note of. It is worth quoting in full:

*"However much we better our methods for authenticating the traditions about Jesus, **we are never going to produce results that can be confirmed or disconfirmed**, Jesus is long gone, and we can never set our pale reconstructions beside the flesh-and-blood original. **We should not deceive ourselves into dreaming methodological sophistication will ever eventuate either in some sort of unimaginative scientific procedure or in academic concord.** Rudolf Bultmann was right to assert that often we are left with only a "subjective judgment". **Until we become literal time travelers, all attempts to find the historical Jesus will be steered by instinct and intuition.** Appeals to shared criteria may... assist us in being self-critical, but **when all is said and done we look for the historical Jesus with our imaginations - and there too is where we find him, if we find him at all.**"⁷¹*

These are serious charges and, by means of them, Allison impugns the entirety of the Quest, accusing it of producing subjective and unverifiable accounts which method does little to secure. In short, he accuses history of being an art and not a science. But he also, thereby, accuses a criteria-led Quest of inhabiting a particular view of the world for it is surely not all that hard to see how "history by criteria" leans towards a scientific view of the world, one in which "interpretation" or "subjectivity" might be regarded as dirty words. Here we might note a shift of guiding assumptions over 40 or 50 years which, as Morna Hooker reports in her foreword to *Jesus, Criteria and the Demise of Authenticity* were, during the 1960s and 1970s, very much about securing a path to a safe and secure, *scientifically-attained* historical Jesus based in things like Form Criticism.⁷² In this light we

⁷¹ *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 7, emphasis mine.

⁷² Morna Hooker, "Foreword: Forty Years On" in *Jesus, Criteria and the Demise of Authenticity*, pp. xiii-xvii.

see that the idea of criteria itself is a situated idea which follows from certain assumptions and historical contingencies. So it is important that Helen Bond, in a review of the same book that Hooker provides the foreword for, notes that times, and so guiding ideas if not also paradigms, have changed.⁷³ Today we regard the gospel writers as creative writers and not compilers of collected material and we think of history as interpretation not as a list of facts strung together. So not only is it the case that the criteria are now noted as much for their impotence as for their utility but it is also the case that they find themselves on scholarly ground no longer fertile for their application. Back then, when criteria were all the rage, “scholarly impartiality” was still a thing. Today, no one is getting away with such a naive notion. Neither are they getting away with the notion that history is merely a matter of inauthentic or authentic piles of material incorporated into gospels. Or lives of Jesus.

Morna Hooker’s suggestion in “Forty Years On” is that instead of thinking of ourselves as scientists of literature, ones who break things down into component parts we then accord authenticity to or withhold authenticity from, we should, instead, stand back and consider the whole for, when we consider the whole, we do have something to work with. This might not necessarily be an intimate, objective picture of indisputable events but then, as Allison has noted above, we should be wise enough to consider this beyond us in the first place. Hooker goes on to say:

“The search for the ‘authentic’ is in fact a strange conceit. For what makes a saying or a story ‘authentic’? Since Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and the Gospels are written in Greek, the record of them inevitably takes us at least one remove from the original, for all translation

⁷³ Helen Bond, “Crumbling Criteria: Constructing an Authentic Jesus” in *Marginalia* dated April 1st 2014 (found online at a source now lost).

involves interpretation. We have to reckon, too, with the interpretation given to the saying or the story by the early Christian community, which handed the tradition on, as well as with that given to it by the evangelist. And what makes a tradition 'inauthentic'?"

The force of Hooker's point is that something is not "inauthentic" merely because someone else but the subject of our history may say it. People can speak truly of others and pretty much everyone would recognise such a thing to be the case. Therefore, criteria which aim at the words and deeds of Jesus but *only* at the words and deeds of Jesus risk excluding valuable information, information that in the normal course of every day life people would accept about or from people they know. Once again, the gospels are interpretive documents but "interpretation" is not a synonym for "untrue" much less for "irrelevant". Hence why some, such as Le Donne, have attempted to plough an historical furrow labelled "memory". We must accept that a concentration on the place and use of the interpretation of Jesus is as valid, if not more valid, than a one-eyed search for a bogus view of what is "authentic", one which, completely untrue to life itself, regards Jesus in isolation. No man, so the truism goes, is an island. We should not expect criteria to find an island either.

It is the necessity of this interpretation, in the sources and in our use of criteria, that leads me to a perhaps suggestive thought. I am currently watching the latest iteration of the Star Trek universe in the new series *Star Trek: Discovery*. As part of my interest in the show I took the impulsive decision to join a couple of fan groups on Facebook and immediately I was confronted with any number of theories and speculations about how various characters or plot aspects of the show might, could, or even should develop. One particular phenomenon I have observed is how numerous people want the show to link

up with other, known elements of the Star Trek universe in its other shows and films. This, perhaps, gives a real time angle of view on what most observe to be happening in the gospels, documents many would argue are setting out to give definitive guides to who Jesus is and what that means in a mythological context. In effect, they are linking him into a larger mythology in differing ways, just as the writers and fans of *Discovery* are doing too with that show and its characters. The difference here is that everything that has ever happened in Star Trek is recorded and immediately checkable. What happened in the life of Jesus is not. And this is where Allison's example of the mythical "Faustina," an invented prophetess who begins speaking "words of Jesus" very soon after his death, comes into play.⁷⁴ For, from the point of view of criteria, it is very hard if not impossible to screen such things out and so those who absolutely insist on Jesus, the historical Jesus and nothing but the historical Jesus are onto something of a hiding to nothing, something that is frankly not there to find. When it comes to Jesus, who wrote no gospels, in the beginning there was the interpretation. And the interpretation was god and the interpretation was the only god. There was nothing but interpretation.⁷⁵

This is where the methods of John Dominic Crossan in *The Historical Jesus* and, more particularly, their spectacular destruction by Allison in *Jesus of Nazareth* are very instructive.⁷⁶ In his book Crossan is very careful and deliberate in opposing theology to history and autobiography to biography. He wants to be seen as pursuing the latter and not the former. And his method for doing that is method itself. He tries to put charges of theological and autobiographical concerns to one side by deploying a very thorough

⁷⁴ Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 7-10, which leads into a direct interaction with the method of John Dominic Crossan in his *The Historical Jesus* in the pages following.

⁷⁵ The writer of the Fourth Gospel here seems to agree. See John 1:1.

⁷⁶ Allison's interaction with Crossan's method specifically is on pp. 10-33 of *Jesus of Nazareth*. It focuses, naturally enough, on Crossan's use of textual sources although, of course, Crossan's method overall is about much more than this. We should also note that in his prologue Crossan says he aims not at "an unattainable objectivity" but "an attainable honesty".

stratigraphy of his sources and a disciplined methodology in his use of them. But is anybody fooled? Is there anyone who reads Crossan and imagines that objective method and stratigraphy have led us to the conclusions he brings forward? In his other writings his concerns and his scholarly views often sit there, cheek by jowl, together in the text. So why not here? I say this not to impugn or to insult Crossan personally. But I do have to wonder at the idea that method can be used as a shield against what, in the end, is the charge of interpretation. Crossan claims to be aware that reconstruction is all we have. That being the case, method can only be justification for results and not their basis.

Another misstep Crossan takes is in thinking that for us to get the historical Jesus right (a dubious goal in itself, at least for one with any knowledge of postmodern historical theory) then all the scholars need to agree. It is to this end that he has, in the past, spoken to the need for a strictly methodological approach. "Without the strictest possible methodology, scholars will disagree not only on the interpretation of any given text but also on what texts are in the original historical Jesus layer of tradition to be interpreted," he writes.⁷⁷ Allison responds by asking if people who use the same methods won't also disagree and, in that, the interpretive aspect is once again introduced. It appears that, at least in the 1990s, Crossan was so blinded by method that he thought that only through it was any truth, regarded as consensus, even possible. For my own part, I would ask why truth is even regarded as consensus, in the sense of everyone coming to the same conclusion, in the first place? Do you know a person about whom everyone you know of has the same views? Do you regard it as the case that unless everyone does come to the same views about a person, either in terms of what they have said and done or in terms of what it means but preferably in both, that

⁷⁷ In John Dominic Crossan, "Jesus and the Kingdom: Itinerants and Householders in Earliest Christianity," *Jesus at 2000* (ed. Marcus J. Borg, Westview, 1997), pp. 32-33

therefore the world is upside down and our views about this person are a collective embarrassment? This appears to be Crossan's view about the historical Jesus and it is a nonsense view, one that not even he would accept about the people he himself knows, I would wager. On this basis, Crossan stratigraphies the Jesus traditions based on numerous conjectures and multitudinous uncertainties and argues that unless we do the same thing too, or refine it so its better, then we are merely adding to a scholarly roll of shame. The only problem with this, and its a big one, is that the entire idea is false. Method in historical research cannot secure results, it can only be used as justification for them. Method is also powerless to resist being used interpretively or with partiality. Ironically enough for Crossan, the best control there might actually be is *the very scholarly diversity he lambasts*. In historical inquiry your best friend is often the person who disagrees with you and demonstrates where you've gone wrong.

On page 17 on *Jesus of Nazareth* Allison notes that, for all his stratigraphy and + and - signs regarding individual traditions, Crossan has basically cobbled together a Synoptic Jesus and there is not much new from outside these sources. Yet Allison also notes something else about the Synoptics (and literary sources for the life of Jesus generally) towards the end of his interaction with Crossan's method, one which leaves it in tatters. It is a very profound thing he admits and one which might not come very easily to many scholars: its "ignorance". He notes that there are hundreds of questions we might properly ask about these sources, how they relate to each other, who used or knew of what, which accounts are earlier than others and which accounts preserve early tradition at all. He notes that we may well have our convictions about this (which he claims to most usually and which Crossan certainly does). However, "*whether our convictions constitute knowledge we can never discover. We just do not know.*"⁷⁸ The sources are a

⁷⁸ Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 31, emphasis mine.

puzzle and they cannot protest however we configure or reconfigure them. Scholarship in general demonstrates this with many configurations apparent at any one time. Yet the conclusion seems clear. We should admit a large degree of ignorance as opposed to publishing our life as *the* life of Jesus.⁷⁹

As far as I can see, this humble admission, not one which is prone to puffing up the claims of one's own work for the benefits of national and international publicity, throws us *yet again* into the arms of interpretation, the subjective historical appreciation of sources which we justify by means of sometimes methodological argumentation for the purpose of making a particular interpretive case. This is why I believe that scholars like Dale Allison and Tom Wright are correct when they argue that we need to be thinking in big categories rather than engaging in stratigraphy in the salt mines of Jesus research. "Our goal is not to be free of prejudices but to have the right prejudices," as Allison puts it.⁸⁰ Thus, I am receptive to Wright's notion (though often not to his individual conclusions!) that the story of Jesus needs to fit into bigger stories.⁸¹ Criteria for research can only make of this man an island. But he never was nor should be that. If he does not make sense as part of stories bigger than his own then he does not make sense at all. But we cannot make of this a criterion of plausibility either since this will never differentiate Jesus from the plausibility that has been an interpretation of someone else.⁸² Plausibility criteria merely establish plausibility and not their source. In the end I can only fall back on the very unscientific notion that history is an art which operates by

79 In this respect Crossan's historical Jesus stands as a test case for all historical Jesus scholarship. In the epilogue to *The Historical Jesus* Crossan refers to his "reconstruction" of Jesus. But why is it a *reconstruction* and not simply a construction? What is the difference here? A subjective view on the plausibility of the Jesus constructed? A question for the whole discipline.

80 *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 39.

81 Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* in particular is soaking in the language of story and in a storied context for the study of the historical Jesus and Christian origins.

82 Here agreeing with Dale Allison in *Jesus of Nazareth*.

intuition, imagination and argumentation, one which frees us from the burden of scientific truth and scientistic notions of the world. Therefore, I heartily encourage scholars to put forward whatever historical cases they will in the knowledge that other interested parties are out there waiting to argue, correct, question, clarify and, occasionally, agree with the interpretive portraits of Jesus brought forth. *The best "criterion of authenticity" I know of is the engaged and informed scholarship of a community of interested others.* As far as I am concerned, it is always a bad sign when any scholar or scholarship seeks to avoid or simply ignores the ideas it brings forth.

What Future for The Quest and the Historical Jesus?

The imminent death of the Quest and the needlessness of its Jesus has been remarked upon throughout its whole existence.⁸³ I am myself in two minds about whether a Quest is necessary and open about if it can achieve anything worthwhile. (That it will continue regardless, however, is certain as long as there are people who will pay for the upkeep of departments of religion, theology or biblical studies and others who will pay to attend them.) My discussions in the two preceding sections of this essay suggest that we will only ever have an interpreted Jesus (or an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation of Jesus) and that we will never be able to get anything other than interpretation.⁸⁴ In addition, the criteria for authenticity, being on a scale from flawed to

83 Scot McKnight is one (evangelical) scholar who has laboured in the fields of historical Jesus scholarship but one wonders why since he is active in his belief that the Jesus of history is both useless for the Church (and so for faith) and incompatible with its theologically constructed Jesus (and so believers must choose history or faith/theology *contra* the views of the equally conservative and Christian N.T. Wright, for example, who pairs history *with* faith). McKnight's own historical Jesus is a theologically compatible construct argued as historical. See his *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Baylor University Press, 2006). He argues, further, that the Quest is an enterprise aimed at "getting behind the gospels" for opposing "the church's Jesus". When he says "Canonical Jesus study sets an interpreted Jesus [canonical Jesus] in his Jewish context while historical Jesus study gets behind the canonical Jesus to the (less interpreted) real Jesus and sets that reconstructed figure in his historical context. I'm all for historical study of the canonical Jesus" we must stand back and wonder at the muddle McKnight has got himself into. McKnight has the interpretation he wants, in other words. He doesn't need other ones. See further: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2012/10/10/historical-jesus-contrarian/>

84 Something for Scot McKnight to consider.

basically useless, are themselves prey to interpretive use. To some this is the record of a desolate past and the promise of an empty future but there is not necessarily any cause for despondency in that. All you have regarding a family member or best friend who perhaps leaves to move to another country is your remembrances and shared experiences of them, some perhaps stored in written or digital markings. When sprinkled with a little creative imagination your thinking of these things is enough to almost make it seem as if they are in the room with you. Your body reacts, a smile at the memories may form, and a genuine experience has been had. All of this was your experience of past events, albeit ones in which you may have been present, although, should someone else share an experience of theirs of the same person with you, you would very easily fit it in with your own memories and experiences too in a very similar way. The point here is that interpretations of people, not least ones based on memory, are neither necessarily poor fare on which to survive nor inadmissible as evidence. I am not a Christian myself and neither do I have any reason to speak to the veracity of the gospels so this point should not be taken as a confessional or an apologetic one.

My own view, as best as I can express it, is that it does come down to choices, intuitions, which are built upon imaginatively and these will likely come from the subjectivity of the inquirer and the particularity of their path through life. I have been thinking recently about the resurrection and I have been thinking about it in the context of the Christian claim that Christianity either stands or falls on the basis of it (with which I agree). I have been reading N.T. Wright's *The Resurrection of The Son of God* to get his historical take on this for the resurrection either happened as an event in history or it did not happen at all. This is to say, as Wright does, that we are talking about an empty tomb and appearances of a person formerly believed dead. Wright speaks of "transphysicality" to

explain this and he argues that the necessary and sufficient conditions for the Christian beliefs about Jesus are that there was an empty tomb and that there were risen appearances and that these must both be the case for it to be true.⁸⁵ Neither he, nor I, will accept wishy washy obfuscations such as that Jesus swooned or that his followers “imagined” appearances of him after the fact. Yet, unlike Wright, I do not accept his two-pronged conditions for the Christian explanation. It seems to me that all that is required is that there be no extant body of Jesus and that his followers believe that he is somehow still alive, a belief that they somehow manage to multiply.⁸⁶ Wright, in his book, argues that *history* doesn’t give us any choice and forces us to his view. I, without being able to account for Jesus’ body or the post-resurrection appearances, demur from that view and remain unconvinced. Logically, if I became convinced, I would have to become a Christian.⁸⁷

Yet if I were in discussion with Wright himself about this I imagine that he would likely want to ask if I live in a world where I think people can rise from the dead, perhaps imagining that if my thinking were open to such a possibility it might make his explanation more convincing. I would reply that under normal circumstances I would not think it possible and, moreover, I would imagine that he would agree with me as well if he was honest. This is important for, as I understand Wright’s argument in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, he is not arguing that anyone can rise as he argues Jesus historically did. Instead, he is saying that this has happened precisely once in the history of the world to the man Jesus. The question then becomes if it is reasonable or plausible

⁸⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 685-718.

⁸⁶ Here we may note that millions today claim to believe in a risen, living Jesus on much less evidence than empty tombs and “transphysical” appearances. Some even die for such beliefs on this much lesser evidence which puts the regular Christian argument that the earliest Christian witnesses to the resurrection are truthful witnesses because they were prepared to die for their beliefs in some jeopardy. This moves the goalposts from “they knew it was true” to “they believed it was true”.

⁸⁷ In my younger days I would have claimed to be. But that’s another story.

to assume, on the basis of even Wright himself arguing this occurrence has happened precisely one time, that it did in fact happen on that occasion. My own position would be that special occasions require special evidences. Wright, I assume, would claim to have provided them in his book. However, having read Dale Allison's humble admission of scholarly ignorance, there is a valid third category besides "it happened" and "it didn't happen" and this is "we don't know". We have no reason for expecting that people will just accept an historical explanation for something because its advocate, as Wright does regularly, argues that *history* forces us to a certain view. If Wright were the *historian* he often refers to himself as then he would know that *history* often doesn't force us to any view and that "not enough evidence to establish a view one way or the other" is often a regular choice too. History is not a game where we have to either bet on red or black every time. We can simply observe and wait for something convincing enough to tempt our own particular intellect. After all, that's what basically every New Testament witness to the supposedly risen Jesus did at first according to its own sources.⁸⁸

So my own view is that there can be no future for the Quest or an historical Jesus which does not make this kind of honesty, humility and interpretivity part of its makeup. The Quest should not be about finding an impossible certainty or be in the business of touting an unobtainable historical fixity. It should instead be more personal, intimate, connected to those who pursue it, recognising that it is the interpretive needs of inquirers which motivate and sustain it. This is the kind of Quest which recognises history as an art not a science and which recognises that language is interpretation not

88 In Mark's gospel, regarded as the earliest canonical gospel and a documentary basis for Matthew and Luke, the disciples flee upon Jesus' capture and the women who go to the tomb flee upon finding Jesus' body missing and being told that he has risen "for they were afraid". Assuming Mark 16:8 is the authentic end of the gospel then we have to leave it there. Matthew changes the women's fear to joy and, moreover, has Jesus meet and encourage them on their way to tell the disciples. Upon Jesus appearing in Galilee even Matthew reports that "some doubted". In Luke the women's testimony is not believed by the disciples and in John we have the story of doubting Thomas. If all these "witnesses", who supposedly knew Jesus personally, could doubt I don't see why anyone with an historical interest should not do so on much lesser evidence and with much less opportunity to verify it than they had.

objective report. To this end, one thing that must finally be done away with is the notion of “the original Jesus”.⁸⁹ Such a thing never has, does not, and will not ever exist. It is merely the product of a not very convincing philosophical outlook on life. Even “what Jesus thought about himself” is not “the original Jesus” for even one’s thoughts about oneself are one’s own interpretive (mis)understandings about one’s thoughts, beliefs, motives and hopes. They may be more immediately available to us subjectively but that does not make them any less interpretive. Even if Jesus had written a diary we would not know anything more about “the original Jesus” but merely his interpretive, subjective experience. But, in any case, it is surely immediately obvious to most inquirers that “the original Jesus” is only wanted as a supposed authority with which to beat opponents in some imagined culture war. It is my hope that the future Quest is more steadfastly focused on historical collegiality than publicity-seeking partiality.

And this brings me to another point that needs to be accepted rather than avoided during any future Quest: It must be acknowledged to be about us, our needs, our desires, our wants, what we can use. It must be acknowledged and recognised that the historical Jesus is an object of our attention and that inquiry into this object is a matter of relating it to ourselves.⁹⁰ Of course, I don’t for a second imagine that this point will be accepted by many engaged in the Quest for most taking part are too timid and too professionalised to take this step and prefer the safety of an imagined scholarly distance, something which also, conveniently, requires somewhat less responsibility in inquiry. Some, I’m sure, would like to continue imagining that historical Jesus study is like archaeology and that all Questers do is uncover what is already there, an act of

⁸⁹ An idea that Larry Hurtado, as only one example, seems very enamoured of in “A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Work” in *Whose Historical Jesus?*, pp. 272-295.

⁹⁰ This is to find the wisdom in the quote “Everything begins with structure, configuration, or relationship” which is credited to Jacques Derrida.

reconstruction not construction. Its nothing to do with them. They just dig away until the truth is found. But it must surely have dawned on many by now that “the truth” will never be found - at the same time as numerous differing audiences imagine that the truth has *already* been found. What this should tell us is that this truth isn’t one thing. Its as multifarious as there are those to seek it. Its as multifaceted as the views of the people who met Jesus while he was alive and thought something about him. (We cannot imagine they all uniformly came to the same conclusion.) In each and every case people saw something of Jesus, related it to themselves, understood as only they could and came to their own conclusions. In this the only thing that is completely beyond comprehension is why, now, we still have any serious person interested in the historical Jesus who imagines that the Jesus that is to be found will be one answer for everyone. To some he will always be a Messiah. To others he will always be a sage. To yet others he will always be a mistaken fool. To yet others he will be no one of any significance. The Quest needs to give up the idea that it seeks one, and only one, answer - for the truth is not one: it is many. It is construction as reconstruction.

As long as there is interest in Jesus, and as long as salvation from our human biological circumstances is still relevant, there will probably be some kind of Quest. The Quest arose because Enlightenment thinking was turned upon the gospels and we began to ask if they were true and to ask if we could imagine the circumstances of their creation. But the truth is that the Quest is not likely to ever discover definitive answers and this fact, and the gaping lacunae that are unlikely to ever be filled, will motivate speculation without end for new generations of Questers whose interest will continually be fanned by those seeking to commercialize or otherwise exploit that interest. There are those, like Dale Allison who pronounced *Constructing Jesus* his last Jesus book in 2010, who

have been wise enough to see this and who have made their contributions and stepped aside.⁹¹ I applaud this for I do not think that there is much point to regurgitating the same things over and over again, the same things that are often, in the end, either unprovable or argumentation for its own sake. I believe in honest inquiries honestly done that are not afraid to face the challenges of a different point of view but that, having studied the evidence, come to a conclusion and then move on. But I do not think that people have to choose one of the options that are currently offered by scholarship as being available. It is only right and proper (and it should be more common) that Questers say “I don’t know” to questions about the historical Jesus. A genuine humility is better than a false certainty and offering a range of possibilities is better than saying something is the case when you don’t have the evidence or the argumentation to establish a case to the exclusion of all others.

This leads me to ask what use the historical Jesus is and what people study this subject for. This is a harder question than might be imagined because I am convinced that there are very few people who can answer it honestly. This is not necessarily because they don’t want to but because, in some measure, they are unable. Like it or not, Jesus has been claimed to be many things for 2,000 years and in any Western town or city, at least, there will be numerous places where he is worshipped as holy and divine. That is one heck of a burden to put to one side when one tries to inquire into this character historically. I question if it is even possible to do so. In a real sense Jesus is never allowed just to be Jesus, he cannot just be Yeshua from Nazareth, anonymous Galilean, anymore. Claims to the contrary swirl all around us and no one entering into the Quest is unaware of them. The problem is not, then, as Schweitzer said, that he comes to us “as one

⁹¹ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, p. ix, “This is my fourth and, I hope, final book on the historical Jesus... It is time to move on to other things.” Note also that Allison has called his book “constructing” not “reconstructing” Jesus.

unknown". The problem is very much the opposite. He comes to us as one only too well known. *Would that we could go back and know him before he had become known at all. For now we know too much and yet nothing at all.*

"The instant you speak about a thing, you miss the mark." - Zen Proverb

"We have art in order not to die of the truth." - Friedrich Nietzsche

"In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa." - Hayden White

5. The Canonical Gospels as Literature

"Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth." - Albert Camus

"Is there any other way to live and any other way to know reality than in parables? There is the possibility that 'in reality' means no more and no less than 'in parables', that reality is parabolic." - John Dominic Crossan

"In a real sense Jesus is never allowed just to be Jesus, he cannot just be Yeshua from Nazareth, anonymous Galilean, anymore. Claims to the contrary swirl all around us and no one entering into the Quest is unaware of them. The problem is not, as Schweitzer said, that he comes to us 'as one unknown'. The problem is very much the opposite. He comes to us as one only too well known. Would that we could go back and know him before he had become known at all. For now we know too much and yet nothing at all." - This author

So where were we? My final quote there, at the head of this chapter, reminds us where I finished with my previous essay for they are its final words. Its not that we know too little, as Schweitzer suggested, perceiving that an apocalyptic stranger was just a person we could never understand, but, on the contrary, we know too much. What we think we know is getting in the way. Making this about knowing, valorizing knowing as what counts, has become the problem. Fixated with knowing we become obsessed with seeing things one way and one way alone. This is very detrimental to our appreciation of the canonical gospels, books which have chosen to be narratives, stories, fictions, because viewed through the one-eyed lens of knowledge obsession they become exactly what they are not. They are set into service as historical chronicles of the life of Jesus,

historically investigative reports of what happened, when and why, lists of imagined facts. Some people even want to read them as literally true history because what matters to these people is facts and facts alone. These gospels are repositories of facts, we are told, and to doubt it is to be of the devil (metaphorically or factually speaking, depending upon your accuser).

This point of view is a problem for it is almost completely wrong. Such a view also exists in a vacuum in which David Friedrich Strauss and John Dominic Crossan, to name but two, had never existed. The former, now the best part of two centuries ago, navigated the waters of supernaturalism and its polar opposite, a studied and rationalistic naturalism, by boarding the boat labelled "myth". Once aboard, he managed to navigate the canonical gospels by pointing out the not inconsiderable facts that the gospel writers were clearly not interested in taking sides in a debate about whether miracles were possible or if these things "really happened" but they were interested in *telling a story*. This, thought Strauss, was bound to end in misunderstanding. As he begins the substance of his epoch-making book, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*,⁹² "Wherever a religion, resting upon written records, prolongs and extends the sphere of its dominion, accompanying its votaries through the varied and progressive stages of mental cultivation, a discrepancy between the representations of those ancient records, referred to as sacred, and the notions of more advanced periods of mental development, will inevitably sooner or later arise."⁹³

This is Strauss' very polite way of saying that having presented the gospels as a particular thing, a thing they are not, it is bound to be found out in the end. And the

⁹² David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (4th English Edition translated by George Eliot from the 4th German Edition, Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, 1902). The German original is from 1835.

⁹³ Ibid., p.39.

deeper the adherents to this “sacred” view dug the hole of their belief, the harder it would be to accept they had misunderstood when the revelation came. However, in the introduction to his book Strauss details how Greeks, Jews and Christians have, throughout their histories, all had recourse to allegorical forms of interpretation so it is not as if literalism, a fixation on fact and historical chronicling or the certainty of knowing had ever been their only interest. It was, as Strauss said in 1835, “impossible to rest satisfied with modes of proceeding so unhistorical, on the one hand, and so unphilosophical on the other.”⁹⁴ Relating the understanding of myth maintained by his forebear, G.L. Bauer, Strauss states, “an unwillingness to regard (some biblical narratives) as mythi can arise only from a false conception of the nature of a mythus, or of the character of the biblical writings.” The problem is that where many read “myth” they understand “wilful falsehoods”.⁹⁵ And that in error. Such people have no conception that myth might be a “necessary vehicle of expression”⁹⁶ or that it might be “a form which is historical”⁹⁷ but a content which is not.

Strauss even maintains that critical scholarship, up to his time, has established differing kinds of myth:

“1st. Historical mythi: narratives of real events coloured by the light of antiquity, which confounded the divine and the human, the natural and the supernatural.

2nd. Philosophical mythi: such as clothe in the garb of historical narrative a simple thought, a precept, or an idea of the time.

94 Ibid., p.52.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., p.53.

3rd. Poetical myhi: historical and philosophical myhi partly blended together, and partly embellished by the creations of the imagination, in which the original fact or idea is almost obscured by the veil which the fancy of the poet has woven around it.”⁹⁸

Strauss was sympathetic to the source material here for he conceded, “To classify the biblical myhi according to these several distinctions is a difficult task, since the mythus which is purely symbolical wears the semblance of history equally with the mythus which represents an actual occurrence.” But, of course, he did not thereby think that the notion of myth should be tucked somewhere out of the way and forgotten about. In detailing the history of the mythical interpretation of Hebrew Bible texts Strauss has reason to call upon W.M.L. de Wette whose view was that “In order to test the historical credibility of a narrative... we must ascertain the intention of the narrator. If that intention be not to satisfy the natural thirst for historical truth by a simple narration of facts, but rather to delight or touch the feelings, or to illustrate some philosophical or religious truth, then his narrative has no pretension to historical validity.”⁹⁹ Already here we see the notion, strange to some, it seems, that books are literary creations in which their writers might have overarching goals, ones not simply or merely historical. Are the canonical gospels lists of facts, a recitation of historical events? It seems clearly and obviously true that they aren’t and even modern conservative Christian scholars with a literal cast of mind and a penchant for declaring their “inerrancy” will still sometimes wax lyrical about their artistry in seeming recognition of this fact.

But there is more to it than this as Strauss continues to detail the views of de Wette who had done much work on the Hebrew Bible narratives as myth. He continues, “Even when

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.54.

the narrator is conscious of strictly historical intentions, nevertheless his point of view may not be the historical: he may be a poetical narrator, not indeed subjectively, as a poet drawing inspiration from himself, but objectively, as enveloped by and depending on poetry external to himself.”¹⁰⁰ Talk of poetry and poets, as well as “the garb of history” and “embellishing”, was and still is disturbing to some, those who, with an eye to what they currently believe, are nervous about, or even hostile towards, ideas which might seem to negate or call into question what they hold so dear, that being a rigidly historical and unpoetic view of the gospels. Such people seem to believe that because they take a certain view of the gospels then their writers, who are simply 2000 year old versions of themselves, must have too. In their reading of the gospels, consequently, the form of history, which speaks little of intent, is ineluctably suffused by them with content *as* history.

But, as Strauss and his Hebrew Bible forebears had shown 200 years ago and more, this is not a remotely necessary leap to make. Because it looks like history or uses historical characters it doesn’t mean it is history. (I am reminded here how my former New Testament teacher, the biblical scholar and classicist Loveday Alexander, once described the book of Acts – and possibly Luke-Acts – as “light fiction” during a lecture in terms of a Hellenistic literary genre.) Indeed, should you manage to break out of a very singular tunnel vision more possibilities become readily apparent. “The mythical mode of interpretation,” says Strauss, “agrees with the allegorical, in relinquishing the historical reality of the sacred narratives in order to preserve to them an absolute inherent truth.” In other words, if you give up history you *haven’t* given up your truth content as a writer. You are merely using a different mode of expression to convey it. Or, to put it another way, historical truth is not the only kind of truth. So, as Strauss continues:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

*"the mythical mode of interpretation agrees with the allegorical, in relinquishing the historical reality of the sacred narratives in order to preserve to them an absolute inherent truth. The mythical and the allegorical view (as also the moral) equally allow that the historian apparently relates that which is historical, but they suppose him, under the influence of a higher inspiration known or unknown to himself, to have made use of this historical semblance merely as the shell of an idea."*¹⁰¹

Strauss has something to say about those who are fixated with the merely historical (anxiety) when it comes to the Christian story and the Christian bible generally, with those who say that other religions may be myths but Christianity is firmly historical. His observation is that:

*"this position, thus stated without further definition and proof, is merely the product of the limitation of the individual to that form of belief in which he has been educated, which renders the mind incapable of embracing any but the affirmative view in relation to its own creed, any but the negative in reference to every other - a prejudice devoid of real worth, and which cannot exist in conjunction with an extensive knowledge of history."*¹⁰²

I find myself agreeing with this whilst noting Strauss' following argument which dissects the various myths around the formation of the four canonical gospels which include their legendary ascriptions to apostles (or supposed companions of apostles where that proves impossible because, for example, Peter perhaps died in the 60s but Mark was not written until the 70s. Compare also Luke, written perhaps in the 80s where Paul had died during the reign of Nero). The literalists, stuck with their narrative of literal historical

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.65.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.69.

truth must, of course, maintain a narrative of truthful, authentic transmission here. They must meet notions of “fiction” or “myth” or “poetry” or “story-telling” head on from their philosophical position. But, so it seems to Strauss and lots of others since, this entails lots of seemingly nonsense arguments to keep it up. Just one of these, the testimony of eyewitnesses, brings forth this comment from Strauss:

*“And with respect to eyewitnesses, if by these we are to understand the Apostles, it is to ascribe to them absolute ubiquity, to represent them as present here and there, weeding out all the unhistorical legends concerning Jesus in whatever places they had chanced to spring up and flourish. Eyewitnesses in the more extended sense, who had only seen Jesus occasionally and not been his constant companions, must, on the contrary, have been strongly tempted to fill up their imperfect knowledge of his history with mythical representations.”*¹⁰³

This is, of course, before we ask ourselves which “eyewitness” told Matthew about the birth of Jesus (there is only one candidate, his mother Miriam) and which “eyewitness” then told Luke a completely different story, one which Luke could usefully pair up with the amazingly fortuitous fact that he had an “eyewitness” to the birth of John the Baptist as well!¹⁰⁴ Perhaps Miriam changed her story and so we, as historical readers, are in the invidious position of having to believe two stories at once, both totally and literally true? Which “eyewitness”, I wonder, was present at the “trial” of Jesus before the Jewish Council or, indeed, at his meeting with the Roman, Pontius Pilate?¹⁰⁵ Which “eyewitness” recorded Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane before his arrest when he is stated

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.74.

¹⁰⁴ Compare at your leisure Matthew 1-2 with Luke 1-2.

¹⁰⁵ Mk 14:53-15:5.

to be alone and at a remove from everyone?¹⁰⁶ Historically, this becomes idiotic to maintain. Gaps are being fictionally filled in and if one can be then they all can be. This, in turn must make us question if a bare, historical record, a testimony to a list of events, is in view for these gospel writers. Of course it isn't. Their interests are much more overarching and literary, much more important, than such a list.

For no canonical gospel writer is a list of historical events a proof of anything for they knew, as well as we can if we look, that cultures left, right and centre can produce similar figures and similar lists. Think of Heracles, the son of Zeus, and all of the mighty works that could be ascribed to him, as just one mighty Hellenistic example. The truth for the gospel writers is not contained in the mundanity of a record of historical events. It requires the world-building significance of story. Thus, Strauss maintains that:

*"Seeing from what has already been said that the external testimony respecting the composition of our Gospels, far from forcing upon us the conclusion that they proceeded from eyewitnesses or well-informed contemporaries, leaves the decision to be determined wholly by internal grounds of evidence, that is, by the nature of the Gospel narratives themselves."*¹⁰⁷

Strauss is arguing that there is no smoking gun which guarantees truthful, historical transmission, be that the arguments of patristic witnesses, the imposition of supposed authoritative writers or the more modern reliance upon studies of oral traditions or even human memories to which he was not privy. To see such a smoking gun takes an unjustified leap of faith, to have an attitude which requires there to be such a gun.

¹⁰⁶ Mk 14:32-42. I will cover the Passion narrative, and its struggle for witnesses, more thoroughly in my third chapter. See p.110 ff.

¹⁰⁷ Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, p.75.

Indeed, when reading the works of those who presuppose and apologetically defend the *primarily* historical view of the canonical gospels one is most immediately convinced that their view comes from just such faith and not from an appreciation of the literature or of matters historical. It is, as Strauss has already so called it, a prejudice. He notes, "How do the Grecian divinities approve themselves immediately to us as non-existing beings, if not because things are ascribed to them which we cannot reconcile with our idea of the divine? Whilst the God of the Bible is a reality to us just insofar as he corresponds with the idea we have formed of him in our own minds."¹⁰⁸ It is these kinds of people who find the machinations of Zeus and Hera, of Athena and Apollo, "mythical" yet maintain that the Christian god made the world in six days, rested on the seventh, and some time later sent his son to earth as a man where he was crucified and rose again from the dead. The one is mythic poetry, the other historical fact! Yet, theologically understood, what could not be mythical about the notion of a son of god (or even a messiah who might not be god but be acting of god) who dies and is restored not just to life but to a resurrected kind of life?

Here myth does not rule out the truth but is a much better means to express it. So it is not even as if the gospels present us with an either/or. Myth does not mean "not true". (In fact, it only actually means "story".) Indeed, reading the gospels we find quite the opposite and this was certainly their intention. As Strauss notes more generally of any religious inclination, "If religion be defined as the perception of truth, not in the form of an idea which is the philosophic perception, but invested with imagery; it is easy to see that the mythical element can be wanting only when religion either falls short of, or goes beyond, its peculiar province, and that in the proper religious sphere it must necessarily

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.76.

exist.”¹⁰⁹ That the gospels speak of god, and his envoy, in terms that are religious and which imply worship of a deity no one will seriously deny. It is Strauss’ argument that myths should thereby be expected. It is, to be crude but accurate, truth through imagery. “A new world of mere imagination is created,” says Strauss.¹¹⁰

Strauss is aware of what will be the immediate objection of the historically fixated: “It is certainly difficult to conceive, how narratives which thus speak of imagination as reality can have been formed without intentional deceit, and believed without unexampled credulity,”¹¹¹ he notes. But to rebut this notion he quotes Otfried Müller at length:

“the idea of a deliberate and intentional fabrication, in which the author clothes that which he knows to be false in the appearance of truth, must be entirely set aside as insufficient to account for the origin of the mythus. Or in other words, that there is a certain necessity in this connexion between the ideal and the real, which constitutes the mythus; that the mythical images were formed by the influence of sentiments common to all mankind; and that the different elements grew together without the author's being himself conscious of their incongruity. It is this notion of a certain necessity and unconsciousness in the formation of the ancient mythi, on which we insist. If this be once understood, it will also be perceived that the contention whether the mythus proceed from one person or many, from the poet or the people, though it may be started on other grounds, does not go to the root of the matter. For if the one who invents the mythus is only obeying the impulse which acts also upon the minds of his hearers, he is but the mouth through which all speak, the skilful interpreter who has the address first to give form and expression to the thoughts of all. It is however very possible that this notion of necessity and unconsciousness, might appear itself

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.80.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

*obscure and mystical to our antiquarians (and theologians), from no other reason than that this mythicising tendency has no analogy in the present mode of thinking."*¹¹²

So Müller, and Strauss in his approving quotation of him, conceives not of myth as deceit (which must necessarily be by one or at most a few people) but as simple appropriate expression, "the mouth through which all speak". Myth is, thus, social in origin and in being articulated myths speak both for and to everyone. Strauss mentions Jewish messianic expressions in this connection, a category into which the early church and gospel writers wanted to locate Jesus:

*"Believing that Moses and all the prophets had prophesied of the Messiah (John 5:46; Luke 4:21; 24:27), it was as natural for the Jews, with their allegorizing tendency, to consider their actions and destiny as types of the Messiah, as to take their sayings for predictions. In general the whole Messianic era was expected to be full of signs and wonders. The eyes of the blind should be opened, the ears of the deaf should be unclosed, the lame should leap, and the tongue of the dumb praise God (Isa 35:5 f.; 43:7; comp. 42:3, 4). These merely figurative expressions soon came to be understood literally (Matt. 11:5; Luke 12:21 f.), and thus the idea of the Messiah was continually filled up with new details, even before the appearance of Jesus... In no case could it be easier for the person who first added any new feature to the description of Jesus, to believe himself its genuineness, since his argument would be: Such and such things must have happened to the Messiah; Jesus was the Messiah; therefore such and such things happened to him."*¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid., p.81.

¹¹³ Ibid., p.84.

We must remember here that, for Strauss, apostles and other potential eyewitnesses of potential historical events were not scrutinising these newly produced narrative gospels for historical errors. In truth, it is likely that no one was. To think of the process this way is to take the wrong tack and to think of gospels as merely a potentially truthful and verifiable list of occurrences rather than as something invested with meaning in which the meaning is paramount. A gospel is “good news” which, at the very least, implies a certain evaluation of events - for it is news thought good. “A fiction,” notes Strauss, “although not undesigned, may still be without evil design”¹¹⁴ and “these fictions, having met with faith, come to be received amongst the legends of a people or religious party, for this is always a proof that they were the fruit, not of any individual conception, but of an accordance with the sentiments of a multitude.”¹¹⁵ If the mythical cap fits those for whom it is written and, indeed, on whose behalf it was written, they are more than happy to receive it. For them it is exactly good news and they hear it with pride.

But Strauss did not conceive of every event and detail in the canonical gospels as myth. Indeed, he was clear that “It is to the various forms of the unhistorical in the Gospels that this enumeration exclusively refers: it does not involve the renunciation of the historical which they may likewise contain.”¹¹⁶ But he did conceive of:

1. Evangelical myths: “a narrative relating directly or indirectly to Jesus, which may be considered not as the expression of a fact, but as the product of an idea of his earliest followers: such a narrative being mythical in proportion as it exhibits this character. The mythus in this sense of the term meets us, in the Gospel as

114 Ibid., p.85.

115 Ibid., p.86.

116 Ibid., p.87.

elsewhere, sometimes in its pure form, constituting the substance of the narrative, and sometimes as an accidental adjunct to the actual history."

2. Pure myths: These "have two sources, which in most cases contributed simultaneously, though in different proportions, to form the mythus. The one source is, as already stated, the Messianic ideas and expectations existing according to their several forms in the Jewish mind before Jesus, and independently of him; the other is that particular impression which was left by the personal character, actions, and fate of Jesus, and which served to modify the Messianic idea in the minds of his people."
3. The historical myths: These have for their groundwork "a definite individual fact which has been seized upon by religious enthusiasm, and twined around with mythical conceptions culled from the idea of the Christ. This fact is perhaps a saying of Jesus such as that concerning "fishers of men" or the barren fig-tree, which now appear in the Gospels transmuted into marvellous histories: or, it is perhaps a real transaction or event taken from his life; for instance, the mythical traits in the account of the baptism were built upon such a reality. Certain of the miraculous histories may likewise have had some foundation in natural occurrences, which the narrative has either exhibited in a supernatural light, or enriched with miraculous incidents."¹¹⁷

So in this Strauss was not completely thoroughgoing. He not did say "all of the gospels are myths from start to finish", for example, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. He concludes his introduction to the mythical in the canonical gospels, which several

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp.86-87.

hundred pages of the rest of his book will flesh out in detail, by noting the following: "In the obscurity which criticism has produced, by the extinction of all lights hitherto held historical, the eye must accustom itself by degrees to discriminate objects with precision; and at all events the author of this work, wishes especially to guard himself in those places where he declares he knows not what happened, from the imputation of asserting that he knows that nothing happened"¹¹⁸ which evinces a certain reticence in comparison to the craven abandon with which his critics over almost 200 years would subsequently charge him. In the end, Strauss only sought to give a contemporary reading to the gospels, documents he regarded as fair game for the same sorts of critical processes and judgments as those of any other culture, religion or faith. In doing so, he revealed them to be less purely "historical" and more literary in nature.

John Dominic Crossan is another who has been on the end of similar charges of academic licentiousness, and often from similar kinds of people such as the pious and the conservative, those I have been calling the historically fixated but whom we may equally describe as the unimaginative. Yet Crossan, who prefers the term parable to myth, has taken that step further which Strauss did not take as witnessed by his 2012 book *The Power of Parable: How Fiction By Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus*.¹¹⁹ The thesis of this book, which hides almost 40 years of the academic study of the parables of Jesus behind its covers if his 1973 book *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*¹²⁰ be taken as the starting point, is that Jesus was a man who used fiction to teach if not goad his hearers. Then Crossan makes the imaginative leap and states that the canonical gospels are themselves parables *about* Jesus. The parabler is made the subject of the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp.91-92.

¹¹⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction By Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (HarperOne, 2012).

¹²⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Harper and Row, 1973).

parables. We should not be surprised by this outcome for already, 37 years earlier in 1975, in his book *The Dark Interval: Towards A Theology of Story*,¹²¹ Crossan could write the following:

"My answer to th(e) crucial problem of the transition from the message of the historical Jesus to the message of the primitive church is guided by this saying: The parabler becomes the parable. Jesus announced the kingdom of God in parables, but the primitive church announced Jesus as the Christ, the Parable of God."

So we can see that already in the 1970s this seed had been firmly planted in Crossan's mind before he ever rose to his fame in the 1990s and beyond as the writer of the best selling *The Historical Jesus: The Life of A Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* and co-chair of the (for some) troublesome Jesus Seminar. It took 21 years from this in 1991 to get to *The Power of Parable* and the notion that the gospels were themselves imitating their subject, that the good news was itself in parables. Crossan, of course, does not hide the fact that parables are fictions and so this claim is to be read, and has certainly been read by some, as saying that the gospels are themselves fictions. This, itself, is doubling down on the notion that already the narratives in the gospels concerning Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, the so-called Passion Narratives, were fictional creations, the meshing of historical reference points with prophetic expectations. Crossan had already called this "prophecy historicized" in *The Historical Jesus*.¹²² So here Crossan was already saying, as he had in *The Dark Interval* in 1975, that "The Cross replaced the parables and became in their place the supreme parable." Now in 2012 he was saying that "When challenge

¹²¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards A Theology of Story* (Argus Communications, 1975). Sadly, mine is a typed copy of the text without pagination. Therefore in what follows I can offer no precise page reference for my quotes. However, the book is short so should you read it it will not take very long. The book has been reprinted since by Polebridge Press.

¹²² The relevant chapter of *The Historical Jesus* is chapter 14, p.354 ff.

parables *about* Jesus get big enough, we call them gospels,” and referring to “history as parable” and “historical characters in parabolic stories”.¹²³ But back in his first book, *In Parables*, Crossan had teased a still more thoroughgoing statement which I make programmatic for my understanding of the gospels by putting it at the head of this chapter:

*“Is there any other way to live and any other way to know reality than in parables? There is the possibility that “in reality” means no more and no less than “in parables”, that reality is parabolic.”*¹²⁴

I see this statement as yet another way to enunciate the thoughts I had when writing my first book, *The Posthistorical Jesus*, which are that the canonical gospels are fictions within a reality we understand through fictions, and that they are fictions which have subtly changed the script from kingdom of God to Jesus the Christ and son of god. If Crossan wants to describe this as a parabolic understanding of a parabolic universe that is fine with me. It certainly makes sense of the gospels as documents which ask questions of readers just as much as they give any answers. For parables, like the canonical gospels, surely do not just give it to you straight. They give it to you crooked and are used to find out what you think you know... and to reveal what you don't. (Compare Mark 4, for example.) As Crossan writes in *The Dark Interval* of parable: “Their value, as knowledge, is to enhance our ‘consciousness of ignorance’ - but that is the beginning of philosophy.” If Jesus, the Lord and Saviour, could use such a tool then why not his faux biographers and popularisers to anyone within the Roman world who would listen?

¹²³Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, pp.142-143.

¹²⁴Crossan, *In Parables*, p.viii.

Perhaps Crossan's insight has some merit then and a prime candidate for the designation "parable", besides the four gospels themselves as Crossan tells the story, now becomes those Passion Narratives which Crossan had designated "prophecy historicized" before. What, indeed, do these narratives mean? We find one in each canonical gospel, strange in itself although not if they each knew of Mark and followed his lead (Matthew and Luke obviously did and Crossan, at least, argues John knew of Mark too), and they gain a disproportionate amount of attention, six of sixteen chapters in Mark, for example. It is reasonable to say that the canonical gospels are not so much interested in the life of Jesus, understood in a whole and rounded way, as in his death with a bit of foregrounding as context and a surprising (or not so surprising) conclusion. But there is a sense in which this is a riddle, or a parable in Crossan's sense of the term, and in reading these books you are meant to figure it out and have your fictions about the world challenged by another one. So shortly I want to interpret a portion of these narratives, with Crossan's help, but before that we must return back to 1975 and some comments of his about myth and parable in *The Dark Interval*.

We know already of Crossan's belief that "the primitive communities spoke of Jesus, the Crucified One, as Parable of God" and we fit this into an understanding of reality which Crossan seems to share with me when he says things like "reality is language and... we live in language like fish in the sea" or speaks of "the inevitability of life within story, of existence in this story or that but always in some story" or states baldly that "reality is relational and relationship." All of these are things I was intending to communicate already in *The Posthistorical Jesus* (chapters 2+3 of this book are taken from this) and it seems that Crossan is on board here. At one point in *The Dark Interval*, when he is setting the scene for his talk about kinds of stories, he has cause to mention philosopher Ludwig

Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein is known, philosophically speaking, for his talk of “language games” and his notion that we all speak from an implicit context.¹²⁵ We have to know some of the rules of this context in order to “play the game” of our language and so be understood. One thing Wittgenstein said about this is “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”¹²⁶ and in *The Dark Interval* Crossan makes a similar point but using a metaphor involving land (which disappears) and sea, which is all around as the infinite and ineffable, and rafts, which are what we are all on, adrift on the sea. Crossan’s point is similar to Wittgenstein’s about the limits of language and its implications for Crossan says, “Thank edges for God.” He means the edges of rafts which is the place where we will experience the limitless sea, the transcendence of God.

All this is important when Crossan comes to address myth and parable in *The Dark Interval*. For Crossan myth is a matter of performing “the specific task of mediating irreducible opposites”. It is a peaceful form of narrative which aims to make sense of things or put them into a context in which we can bring a kind of order. Myth is about “the possibility of solution” and about establishing this possibility itself. But not so with parable. Parable, which Crossan sees as the functional, binary or polar opposite of myth, “brings not peace but the sword,.. parable casts fire upon the earth which receives it.” Crossan sees myth, after literary critic Frank Kermode, as an “agent of stability” whereas parables are “agents of change”. Myths, in some sense, should reassure then where parables unnerve or unsettle: “I don’t know what you mean by that story but I’m sure I don’t like it.” Myth tries to resolve and create the conditions for a permanent reconciliation of belief but parable creates “contradiction” and reveals that our reconciliations are “made up”. Myth answers questions, parable put things into question,

125 The fullest expression of Wittgenstein’s thought on this is his *Philosophical Investigations*, (Basil Blackwell, 1953) which has been republished several times and is a classic 20th century philosophical text.

126 This is proposition 5.6 of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

starting with us! As Crossan describes this: “You have built a lovely home, myth assures us: but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault.”

So we have here a symbiotic relationship of myth and parable: “myth establishes world” and “parable subverts world”. Parable subverts world that is created in the first place by myth. In a post-Strauss world of canonical gospel criticism the implications here should be obvious. One implication is, as Crossan phrases it, that “to live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth *and* parable.” There can be no parable without myth but, fortunately, myths are all around us in the gospels. This, then, is the perfect place for parable to infiltrate, “deliberately calculated to show the limitations of myth, to shatter world so that its relativity becomes apparent.” Crossan gives us two examples from the Hebrew bible in the books of Ruth and Jonah. The former subverts the expectation that King David will have a pure Jewish ancestry when it is revealed that the faithful Ruth, from Moab, is his great-grandmother (character subverts the myth of nationality). The latter, instead of giving us a story of obedient prophets and disobedient pagans, gives us a story of a disobedient prophet and pagans so obedient that even the animals obey (outcomes subvert expectations). Crossan summarises these examples with the warning “What if God does not play the game by our rules?”

When Crossan discusses Jesus as parabler in *The Dark Interval* he does so describing Jesus as one who not only speaks parables but acts them out. A good example, which Crossan uses, is Jesus’ consorting with “tax collectors and sinners” such as Zacchaeus.¹²⁷ As Crossan understands this, the parabolic situation is that “one expects Jesus as a prophet of God to consort with the virtuous and not with sinners. If he does the opposite, does this mean that the virtuous are sinners and sinners virtuous, or what?”

¹²⁷ Lk 19:1-10.

Crossan makes the point that the parabolic deed does not here state that tax collectors or sinners *are* virtuous; it begs the question and pokes a big stick into the notions of sin and virtue that people carry with them. It makes us wonder if we have our ideas right. It threatens to tip up our world. The parabolic deed of Jesus, in other words, is questioning the background understanding of those present who are murmuring about his associations.

But we also need to take notice of the fact, in the light of Crossan's more recent thesis in *The Power of Parable*, that this Jesus and his actions are now written in books by authors who can arrange their contents and decide their purposes exactly as they like. It is Crossan's thesis, with which I agree, that the gospels themselves become parables, parables that make use of multiple parables within themselves, in order to place these same unsettling thoughts into the minds of their readers within the context of the greatest parabolic question they know of: who is Jesus? (Answer: he is God's parable.) Of course, in the use of parable, and the myth which it presupposes, we have gone far beyond the simplistic notion that the canonical gospels are *primarily* interested in historical recitation. Better, then, to think of them as concerned with the mythical and parabolic (remember the tension between these two which Crossan suggests!) that swirls about as a tempest above fixed historical points. Do the gospels think Jesus existed? Yes. Do they think he spoke of the human relationship to god in a plausible first century Palestinian Hellenistic-Jewish context? Yes. Do they think he was outspoken in word and deed? Yes. Do they think he died and rose again? Yes. But outside of such fixed points they feel free to say whatever fits with what they take all these fixed points to mean. What they mean is the point not pandering to some 21st century literalist's timetable of events or existential need for the certainty of their historicity. Meaning

trounces historicity in their way of thinking. Much better, they think, to disturb our view of the world with the unsettling and hard to pin down meaning of Jesus.

As Strauss suggested earlier, then, if Jesus was thought the Messiah then, naturally, all messianic things must apply to him. If “son of god” which, in Hellenistic context perhaps more than Jewish, makes sense, then his “good news” should show this too. Mark’s gospel, for example, can certainly be seen as a book which aims, parabolically, to say “Jesus is the son of god” in a way that both Jews and Hellenists might perceive as a subversion of their worlds. What else is that centurion in Mark 15:39 there for? Crossan’s judgment in *The Power of Parable* is that “Mark, turning history (the execution of Jesus) into parable (the conversion of the centurion), knows exactly what he is doing”.¹²⁸ Or what about the empty tomb from which the frightened women run away in chapter sixteen of Mark?¹²⁹ What should that unsettling ending convey? In this connection of gospel and parable the gospel of John, in which Jesus speaks no parables, is then the clue to the purpose of these four gospels in that it differs radically in tone and approach to the synoptics... yet ends up with a similar purpose. In all four cases gospels are presented which aim to parabolically subvert human understanding with the person of Jesus. And this makes sense for if they had merely repeated his message of the kingdom of a Jewish god then how could such a message have ever spread to the Hellenised in a Roman empire? By concentrating on the person of Jesus the message was immediately made more accessible to more people. “Son of God” or even pre-existent Word, as in John (Jn 1:1-18), are understandings with much wider applications, revealing not only of theological development but of the situations in which these books were written which were not that of the Palestinian Jesus himself with his narrower focus on the kingdom of

¹²⁸ Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, p.171.

¹²⁹ Mk 16:8.

the Jewish god. So the canonical gospels make “Jesus become parable” the message and relay their parabolic good news with the understanding “let anyone listen with ears to hear!”.

Let us move back to the beginning of the Passion Narrative to discuss this further. I choose Mark’s version which begins at Mark 11 and I focus, first of all, on Jesus’ activity in the Temple at Mark 11:15-19 which Crossan sees as a “symbolic destruction” in *The Historical Jesus*,¹³⁰ placed, as it is, between the cursing and withering of the fig tree. But what did this action mean and what did Jesus do it for? Crossan highlights that, in his view, the activities of the Temple, including its necessary operations facilitating the Temple cult with its sacrificial purpose, were not in any way illegitimate. So he rejects the notion, widely suggested by others, that this was a “purification”. We can now further note that there are various texts in Mark, as well as in John, who sets this event at the beginning and not towards the end of the gospel, and in Thomas (GTh 71), which demonstrate remembrance of a word of Jesus relating to destroying and building. At Jesus “trial” before the Jewish Council in Mark one of the (to Mark illegitimate) ways they try to impugn Jesus is by suggesting he had threatened the Temple. Jesus is also taunted from the cross by a bystander and the idea of that which is destroyed being rebuilt in three days is appended. Thomas 71 preserves what Crossan regards as the oldest form of this saying of Jesus “I shall destroy this house and no one will be able to build it...” In John 2, where he relates the Temple action of Jesus, the writer feels the need to say that in speaking in such a way Jesus was referring to *his body* and the notion of three days is again in evidence along with fortuitous remembrances of the disciples. In Mark and John’s uses of such Temple traditions in relation to this destroying and

¹³⁰Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.359.

building texts from the Hebrew Scriptures are in evidence. How do we account for all this?

I think that Crossan's way is largely persuasive.¹³¹ That Jesus did cause a kerfuffle in the Temple is held by many as one of the surest historical facts in the gospels for it is for most interpreters the proximate cause of Jesus' arrest and subsequent death. Indeed, without it could we even explain why Jesus is ever killed? Rome did not crucify people who said "Blessed are the poor." But without getting lost in pietistic notions of this action being made with divine foreknowledge or Jesus being fated to do it by some divine destiny we must ask what Jesus disturbing the Temple's operations meant for him and what it means for those who write about it in books. In terms of historical analysis the sequence seems quite clear. Jesus disturbs the Temple's operations, making a display of himself, and we can imagine he was not silent and stony-faced in going about it. He speaks of destroying and building, not clearly and openly but cryptically and parabolically, which explains why the hard of thinking can't simply pin a plain, simple and unarguable charge on him before authorities Jewish or Roman. In later recitation this word is developed into a parallel with the Christian story and the "house" Jesus had parabolically spoken of, which could easily be applied to the Temple, can become his body with the addition of the mention of three days which was absent from Jesus' original words. One parabolic action and one parabolical word are set to use in a wider parabolical story about Jesus himself. As to Jesus, who died four decades before the Temple's actual destruction, something all four canonical gospels likely post-date, he was subverting the view that God's availability was mediated through the cult apparatus, which the gospels switch the focus from, making it about Jesus himself and what is now offered through an acknowledgement of him instead. For the literary, fictional,

131 Cf. Crossan, *ibid.*, pp.355-360, Mk 11:15-19 and Jn 2:13-22.

parabolic, canonical gospels Jesus is the parable. For Jesus it was the kingdom of God which was presented in parables for Jesus' ideas about it were to subvert those of his hearers as were those writing about him of their readers'.

I think there is a common element here and it is something Crossan brings up in relation to the parables of Jesus in *The Dark Interval*. There he writes:

"What is the connection between these two points, the kingdom of God and the stories of Jesus? I would suggest that the connection is summed up in the maxim: Parables give God room. The parables of Jesus are not historical allegories telling us how God acts with mankind; neither are they moral example-stories telling us how to act before God and before one another. They are stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of story itself. They remove our defences and make us vulnerable to God. It is only in such experiences that God can touch us, and only in such moments does the kingdom of God arrive."

Such a notion of story and the place of parable in the activities of Jesus makes sense when compared, for example, with his ethical stances as I tried to detail in the middle section of *The Posthistorical Jesus*.¹³² Jesus' notion of ethical responsibility was, I argued there, considerably radical, not least in what I think was one of its most immediate markers, itinerancy, and the necessary mutuality and reordering of social understandings it implies. I travel along with Crossan when he transfers this idea of parable in the activities of Jesus to the activities of canonical gospel writers, those who have a task related to that of Jesus but, in their case, about Jesus. But I think this rightly entails us making a shift of emphasis in relation to these gospels in so doing. Simply put, we have

¹³² In this book the middle section was my own invention of a gospel, from other gospels, and reflections upon it.

to recognise these as never less than literary books utilising literary forms of expression and explanation (like myth and parable) and worry about the history later, if at all. This is not to be a historical skeptic for neither Strauss nor Crossan nor I see the gospels as totally unconcerned with the historical world and the historical realities which we each have in common. It is a matter of asking how these are dealt with, processed and presented. To my mind the case for myth and parable, as explained by Strauss and then Crossan, makes perfect sense and esteems the material of the gospels as highly as any blinkered inerrantist could. The difference is in the fact that it doesn't belittle and tie the hands of the communities that created the gospels in so doing. The gospels, then, are mythical and parabolic. They are fictions related to and about history. They are stories out to unsettle the worlds of those who read them, to question their readers' views of reality, to offer a new fiction in place of old ones.

I leave the last word to Crossan from the closing words of *The Dark Interval*:

"People are fond of discussing two types of religion, the historical and the mythical, and of asserting that Judaism and Christianity are in the former category because they link their claims to the objective reality of certain key events. Maybe the time has come to retire this distinction as irrelevant and to replace it with another. The more useful distinction might be between mythological religion, a religion that gives one the final word about "reality" and thereby excludes the authentic experience of mystery, and parabolic religion, a religion that continually and deliberately subverts final words about "reality" and thereby introduces the possibility of transcendence.

Which do we prefer, comfort or courage? It may be necessary to make a choice."

6. Death, Burial and Resurrection: The Crux of It All

"Salvation was not from but through death, not in the here below but in the imminent hereafter. It was not salvific miracle but exemplary death that counted." - John Dominic Crossan

"It has become clear from scholarly analysis that the Resurrection narratives in our Gospels are not reports of real facts. They do not coincide with each other, and they contain internal inconsistencies. Moreover, these are not the sort of minor disagreements which happen when important events are related by different people over a lengthy period of time: they are organically serious disagreements, which arose because of the needs of the independent Christian communities for whom the Resurrection stories were written and rewritten." - Maurice Casey

I should begin this chapter by quoting Paul, the apostle of Jesus who never met Jesus - outside of a miraculous vision that his companions on the road to Damascus seem not to have seen.¹³³ You see, for Paul its all about the death and resurrection of Jesus. If these didn't happen, if his witness to them is not true, then he has been going around Greece and Asia Minor talking rubbish. Such, at least, is the import of 1 Corinthians 15.¹³⁴ Of course, I have shown elsewhere, as have many biblical scholars, that the putative Sayings Gospel Q and the very real Gospel of Thomas either have no knowledge of, or no interest in, such things. But, perhaps, that is for them to explain. Here I am concerned with the

¹³³ Acts 9:7.

¹³⁴ "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

four intracanonical gospels, the ones that have made Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection programmatic for the entire meaning of these books, the "testament" they are contained in and the orthodox faith which makes them foundational documents. Note here that I have focused on three things, death, burial and resurrection. Each is important in its own way. For the Christian story with a fourfold witness to be true then Jesus must die, he must be buried and he must rise. Burial is important here because without it how can there be any empty tomb? If we did not know where Jesus was buried that would, perhaps fatally, disrupt the smooth transition from death to new life.

I have set at the head of this chapter two quotations by the scholars I am going to be following through the argumentation of this chapter. The first is Maurice Casey, a British scholar who wrote his book *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* in 2010.¹³⁵ Casey, who claimed to hold no theological views, sadly died in 2014. His specialism, especially in later years, was the recovery of the Aramaic behind the gospel texts for, he argued, Jesus and his contemporaries spoke Aramaic and so recovery of plausible Aramaic behind the Greek of the New Testament would aid genuine historical study of Jesus.¹³⁶ His book is full of this interest and, indeed, he makes recovery of genuine Aramaic a large part of what he regards as a criterion of plausibility in historical Jesus study. Casey often bemoans the fact that the guild of scholars more widely has focused on this so little, mostly because very few New Testament scholars have learnt Aramaic for themselves and so are simply unable to pursue such study. He believes that Aramaic source documents may lie behind the text of Mark, which,

¹³⁵ Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (T + T Clark, 2010).

¹³⁶ See Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* (SNTSMS; Cambridge, 1999) and *An Aramaic Approach to Q: Sources for the Gospel of Matthew and Luke* (SNTSMS; Cambridge, 2002). It should be noted that Casey's views on Q do not follow the consensus in scholarship exemplified by the views of a scholar such as John Kloppenborg which I have reproduced elsewhere. Casey's views may be concisely described as the view that Q was more likely fragments of tradition than a single document added to in layers. See *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.78-86.

following the 2004 doctoral dissertation of his student, James Crossley, he believes to be dated to around 40 CE, much earlier than is generally thought and only about 10 years after the death of Jesus. This dating, and his views about Aramaic, mean that, in his study of Jesus, Casey relies a great deal on Mark as an historical source. Indeed, it is perhaps not going too far to say that Casey gambles everything on Mark, the other three intracanonial gospels being derivations or expansions there from.¹³⁷

At first I had not wanted to make my second scholar in this chapter John Dominic Crossan. This is because I have already made use of some of his arguments in my previous chapter as well as borrowing his inventory of the Jesus tradition for other work I have done elsewhere. So, in other words, I do not want to give the impression that I am just a Crossan fan repeating his arguments in a fan boyish way. However, in the end it was Maurice Casey's book itself that convinced me to add the thoughts of Crossan on the subjects with which this chapter deals as well. Casey, in the opening chapter of *Jesus of Nazareth*, takes aim at a number of kinds of scholarship, the religiously motivated not least of all, but another kind he takes aim at is that he idiosyncratically refers to under the rubric "*American Jesus Seminar*".¹³⁸ It is not clear what Casey means by denominating it "American" (although, of course, it almost entirely was) but one imagines that it is not thought complimentary. It seems to at least denominate the view that Casey locates its kind of scholarship to an American milieu. In any case, Casey often singles out Crossan personally as perhaps the foremost member of the Seminar whose idiosyncratic views are to be opposed with genuine history.¹³⁹ Idiosyncrasy and a scholarly courage to make

¹³⁷ See *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.62-78, for Casey's views on Mark.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp.18-21.

¹³⁹ As indicated by his section being titled "Crossan and the American Jesus Seminar". Casey's tour through the history of the Quest for the Historical Jesus more widely seems to be dominated by one issue: how Jewish is the Jesus found? This will be seen to be his key interest throughout his entire study. Very Jewish is good. Not Jewish enough is unhistorical in Casey's view.

claims not more generally supported are things that Casey and Crossan have in common. And so because Casey finds Crossan a scholar whose views are worth opposing it makes sense for me to bring Crossan into this chapter quite formally. So what I will do is consider the arguments of Casey in *Jesus of Nazareth* and Crossan in *The Historical Jesus* and see where that leaves us.¹⁴⁰ Casey is a traditional, conservative scholar whose first impulse is to preserve what is in the text and Crossan is a liberal scholar not afraid to offer a bold thesis which does away with it. It should at least be fun to see where we arrive. And then there is what happened to Jesus muddled up in there somewhere too.

Let us start somewhere where there is no disagreement at all. Jesus is crucified by Roman authority under Pontius Pilate. It is under Roman authority because only Rome had such an authority. Crossan and Casey and pretty much every other scholar of the subject agree about this. Here is scholarly consensus.¹⁴¹ This is an historical fixed point. But in dealing with these events we will find that there are few such things. As to if we have an historical report of events, that is a matter of controversy probably decided on the basis that where you start is where you will finish. It is as well here that I lay out how Casey and Crossan approach things as scholars and historians.

Casey approaches the events of Jesus' last hours through the lens of the Gospel of Mark.¹⁴² For Casey, Mark is the main historical witness to these events and the rest are

140 That said, much of Crossan's research here relies on his previous work in his book *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (HarperCollins, 1988) and after *The Historical Jesus* he also wrote *Who Killed Jesus: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (HarperCollins, 1995). Together with Marcus Borg he authored *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (HarperOne, 2006) and with his wife Sarah Crossan he is due to publish *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision* (forthcoming; HarperOne, 2018). In what follows I am following *The Historical Jesus* almost exclusively for Crossan's views since it is his best known book.

141 Unless you are a scholar called Robert M. Price on whom see the next chapter.

142 Casey deals with the death of Jesus in chapter 11 of *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.401-453.

derivative or expansionist but not genuinely independent. Casey regards John as almost an abject fiction. Indeed, he doesn't even discuss John in the main text of his book, relegating it instead to an "appendix of falsehood" along with the gospels of Thomas and Mary.¹⁴³ This means that, could Mark be discredited, the history as a whole would be much less secure in Casey's terms. Casey wants to believe that Mark is historical report (he often calls it "report") and his method is to try and give historical plausibility to the text *as is* if he can. Casey places Jesus in Jerusalem at all because, after his historical analysis of Mark prior to the Passion, it is his view that Jesus went to Jerusalem thinking he would die, indeed, intending to die, indeed, aiming to bring it about. Jesus also thought he would rise again according to Casey.¹⁴⁴

Thus, Jesus' action in the Temple and his teaching there on subsequent days of his last week Casey essentially sees as a form of provocation.¹⁴⁵ Jesus is trying to get into trouble which in such a place at such a time (Passover festival) would be likely to bring a capital charge. Casey, unlike Crossan, is not so much interested in why Mark writes what he writes so, in this sense, Casey is naive. Casey is one who wants to historically explain the given text in terms of events. Mark's motivations (or those of his copyists) only come into it where Casey finds he cannot give any historical plausibility to the story as is. Casey is less methodological in historical terms than Crossan is. For example, Casey, unlike Crossan, does *not* bracket singly attested material because much of Mark used by Matthew and Luke is this. Casey, as already noted, has already pitched his tent on Mark as "oldest and most accurate" source. And so one gets the impression that Casey feels he will have nothing to talk about if this material is bracketed. For Crossan this is no

143 Ibid., pp.511-525. This is based on his earlier, negative assessment of John in *Is John's Gospel True?* (Routledge, 1996).

144 See Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.377-381, p.422, p.428 and p.432 especially for this.

145 Ibid., p.453.

problem as he is ready to give an overarching explanation for Mark's whole story (it is a fiction). Casey, however, approaches it wanting to regard it as history if he can.

Historically, then, Casey's basic approach is via a criterion of historical plausibility. He talks about this in his chapter on historical method near the beginning of *Jesus of Nazareth* mentioning Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter as recent scholarly proponents of a version of this criterion.¹⁴⁶ The problem with it, and there are a few such problems, is that it is a conservative criterion. For example, Casey seeks to explain the Markan text regarding Judas and his betrayal of Jesus *as it is* because it has "such a perfect setting in the life of Jesus".¹⁴⁷ At the same time, Casey criticises scholar Hyam Maccoby for having no "explanation" of why Mark uses the story we now read about Judas Iscariot in Maccoby's own reading of the story as Christian anti-semitism. Yet Casey's own "explanation" is a simple belief that it is true "because it fits". This is hardly an "explanation" itself. Casey actually writes that "it is well known and ought to be obvious that Mark did his best to construct a coherent narrative from the traditions which reached him, which were incomplete".¹⁴⁸ And this is my problem with the "historical plausibility" criterion that Casey has earlier trumpeted in support of Theissen and Winter: it is no criterion at all and has no teeth. "Its there so I will believe it": this is what "plausibility" means in the end. It is the criterion in which the historian actively tries to make things fit, the polar opposite of suspicion (which, unless I am mistaken, was the originating impetus of the "Quest for the Historical Jesus" at all). What anchors Casey's

146 Casey's third chapter of *Jesus of Nazareth* covers "historical method" (pp.101-141). Here the "most important criterion" is to place Jesus "within the framework of first century Judaism" (p.141) yet one heading he discusses (for 12 pages!) under the general heading "historical method" is that of "Aramaic". This he regards as part of the wider "plausibility" criterion that was put forward in the late 1990s by Gerd Theissen and his student, Dagmar Winter. See Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Westminster John Knox, 2002) from a German original from 1997.

147 Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.428.

148 Ibid.

"historical plausibility", furthermore, is a belief that Mark is the only basic history we have about the subject and that Jesus may *only* be described as a sincere and faithful Jew of the period (whatever that is). "Historical plausibility" is thus predetermined to be finding *the synoptic Jesus the Jew*. (This, as we will see in the next chapter, is essentially the critique of Burton Mack except he denominates the whole thing the creation of a myth.)

To this end, Casey is very fond of saying words to the effect of "it is not the kind of thing that the early church would be motivated to produce" of the text where he can supply his "plausible" history which he regards as finding the synoptic Jesus the Jew.¹⁴⁹ And yet Casey never seems to say, in general, what "they" (in all their possible diversity) *would* be motivated to produce nor what their overarching purposes were in writing gospels. This is because Casey claims a theological naivety in favour of a purely historical interest. In fact, Casey has remarkably little redactional curiosity regarding Mark especially (which is necessarily theological, not to say christological), something which is not only legitimate but fundamental to the historical task he is meant to be about. In short, why Mark has put something in a book and what his book is for and why his book is like this in particular are legitimate questions to ask. This is why people such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus and David Friedrich Strauss, as two notables, investigated the gospels, creating a "historical Jesus" distinguished from his literary portrayals in doing so.¹⁵⁰ Most often Casey is more concerned with "finding" Aramaic backgrounds to texts which aids his "plausibility" agenda which is a conservative agenda, an agenda aiming to conserve the text as plausible history. Ironically, when Casey finds bits he doesn't like (such as Jesus'

149 See examples, *ibid.*, pp.428, 438.

150 On Reimarus see C. H. Talbert (ed.), *Reimarus: Fragments*, (translated by Ralph S. Fraser, Fortress, 1970). For Strauss see *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* and my *precis* of this in the previous chapter of the current book.

'trial" before Caiaphas, for example) he *can* then say it has "an excellent setting in the early church"¹⁵¹ or that "The rest of Jesus' reply is a midrash created on the basis of Dan. 7.13, Ps. 110.1 and probably Zech. 12.10, just the sort of activity characteristic of the early church, who searched the scriptures for evidence of Jesus' speedy return."¹⁵² This, as we will soon see, mimics Crossan who is skeptical of the narrative as a whole.

So the problem I diagnose for Casey here is that if the early church "searched the scriptures for evidence" then why didn't (or couldn't) they do it for everything? And where's the line regarding when they did this and didn't?¹⁵³ Again, at the Pilate "trial" Casey can say "Mark and/or his predecessors produced a narrative plausible to them" but there is no answer to the question, which is logical in raising itself, "If here then why not elsewhere?"¹⁵⁴ So may we also ask why Casey feels free to regard Mark as indulging in "creative writing" about the Temple curtain being torn in two?¹⁵⁵ Later he will talk of "Mark's rewriting" regarding Jesus' burial.¹⁵⁶ "Historical plausibility" seems to be a matter of Casey's historical spidey senses, for example, in his generalised statement that "The narrative parts company with accurate history almost completely after Jesus' arrest, when most of his followers fled".¹⁵⁷ In another example, Casey claims that Jesus knew Judas was betraying him but gives no historical support as to how he knew.

In short, and in general, Casey doesn't really get to grips with history, the thing, ironically, he claims to be most concerned about. He, like many pious believers he does

¹⁵¹ Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.440.

¹⁵² Ibid., p.441.

¹⁵³ As far as I can tell Casey has no answer for this and he seems barely even interested in the question.

¹⁵⁴ Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.443.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p.447.

¹⁵⁶ E.g., *ibid.*, p.451. "We should not believe any of this rewriting," he states on p.452.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.438.

not number himself amongst, hides behind plausibility and the knowledge we can rarely definitively say "that never happened" or "that wasn't said". In his frequent declaring "this happened", which he often wants to, he never really tackles the big questions. As a further example take Jesus' arrest.¹⁵⁸ Casey writes, "He had nonetheless waited to be arrested, because this was God's will written in the scriptures." Yuck! And then, "Jesus knew exactly what he was doing". Double yuck! *This is the kind of stuff dyed in the wool believing scholars like N.T. Wright or James D.G. Dunn would write.* Casey never answers the question that, interestingly, is probably Crossan's major interest: why is this in this book? What does this book mean? Why does this book exist?¹⁵⁹ Yet Casey knows very well that creation and reinterpretation occurred¹⁶⁰ and, as we will see, he agrees with Crossan here when he acknowledges it.¹⁶¹ But Casey simply gives no methodological or explanatory scheme for how he decides what is history and what is not. The implication is that he picks and chooses to taste which, of course, is exactly what he does. Plausibility has nothing to do with it. Plausibility is another name for "what suits me is history".

In contrast to Casey's general approach to the text we have John Dominic Crossan's. It is fair to say that Crossan sees the Passion of Jesus as fiction whole and entire.¹⁶² This is to

158 Ibid., p.439.

159 Ibid., pp.439-440, never asks such questions at least discussing the arrest which is regarded as "historically accurate". It can only be because Casey has made a choice to believe Mark.

160 Ibid., pp.101-102, clearly states this.

161 In his chapter on historical method Casey has a section headed "Rewriting History, Telling Stories and Social Memory". Here (p.133) he quotes April DeConick with favour from her book *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth* (LNTS 286. London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 12: "the formation of communal memory is not a retrieval of past traditions and history. Rather it is the 'reconfiguration' of the past, making it conform to the present experiences and future expectations of the group. 'Remembering' is not a matter of recall, but a selection and reorganization of traditions so that the present can be better understood in light of its past and a sense of continuity between the present and the past is achieved. In this sense, it is best characterised as retrospective. These retrospective reconstructions of the past are largely achieved by adapting traditions and historical facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the contemporary group." This seems to evince a much more *creative* (reconfigurational) process than Casey seems to allow for in his own historical analyses which are more simply black or white, historical or not.

162 This is my conclusion having read the 14th chapter of *The Historical Jesus*, "Death and Burial," pp.354-394, in any case.

say that he does not see *the event* as a fiction, an untruth, a non-event; he sees its narrative description in the gospels as a gauze of fiction laid over historical fixed points such as Jesus causing a disturbance in the Temple, Jesus being arrested and Jesus being crucified.¹⁶³ Thus, Crossan, in distinction to Casey, is not looking to validate the text as history if he can; he is seeking to explain it as theological writing about an historical event: the death of Jesus and its significance. Important here is how Crossan views Jesus to begin with. This was also true for Casey, of course, who, as mentioned, thinks of Jesus as one who went to Jerusalem to die as one within a Jewish prophetic tradition. Crossan's view of Jesus is as one who opposed empire and brokerage with the brokerless kingdom of God.¹⁶⁴ Thus, he sees in Jesus' action in the Temple a "symbolic destruction" as opposed to Casey's view of it as a "cleansing".¹⁶⁵ The difference here is that for Crossan this action is about the kingdom Jesus represents as against the kingdom earthly powers represent. For Casey, Jesus performs an action internal to Judaism, his semantic lens of choice. So Casey makes the Temple action and Jesus' subsequent hanging around the Temple precincts on consecutive days after this the proximate cause for his arrest and eventual death. For Casey, Jesus has provoked the reaction that was required of him. Crossan is methodologically less sure of this. He assumes the Temple action was what tipped the Jewish authorities over the edge but he cannot methodologically and so historically (in his terms) link the two.¹⁶⁶ Of course, Crossan does not take the view that because Mark wrote things a certain way then they must be true (as Casey sometimes seems to).

163 His comment, "That never happened, of course, but it was true nonetheless," made of the troubled dreams Matthew 27:19 says Pilate's wife had (ibid., p.394) may do service for the whole narrative.

164 Thus, his book is organised into sections such as "Brokered Empire" and "Brokerless Kingdom".

165 Cf. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp.355-360, with Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.408-415.

166 Crossan writes: "But the confined and tinder-box atmosphere of the Temple at Passover, especially under Pilate, was not the same as that in the rural reaches of Galilee, even under Antipas, and the soldiers would have moved in immediately at any disturbance. None of that can be grounded in this book's methodology, so it must be taken very carefully" (*The Historical Jesus*, p.360).

Neither Crossan nor Casey think that Jesus instituted the Eucharist during his final Passover.¹⁶⁷ Casey goes into great historical detail about the Seder as his Judaistic agenda dictates he must, setting the meal in context and relating it to Mark's description of events. This is what a program of historical plausibility looks like, after all. Crossan, as is usual for him, gives a literary-historical explanation for its development in terms of texts. There is no reason to think that Jesus did not share a Passover meal with some of his followers on that night but writing about it in books is a matter for writers and not the historical actors portrayed in the story, those who are mute before the writer's pen and reliant upon that very same pen for their words, actions and motivations. Crossan, one imagines, would think that Casey's view of Mark as one who was only doing his best to write historical reports is terribly sweet but also utterly misguided.

In truth, what we learn from combining these two scholars especially is that historical knowledge of historical contexts and a concern for writers and why they write books are *both* important. Casey writes of historical contexts in an informative way regardless of Mark's purposes, Crossan, who similarly esteems Mark as major (*extant* historical) source but for very different reasons, reminds us that it is only through the interpretive grid of Mark's purposes that any history is revealed. To this end, we should note that Crossan talks of the Passion narratives generally through the interpretive grid of a Jewish tradition of sequential and testimonial *commentary* on events which is a *scribal* activity in which the two birth *narratives* of Jesus are illustrative. This can also be described as a movement from "prophetic allusions" to "historical narrative". The birth narratives are not literally true, of course. The fact they are almost entirely different save, tellingly, a few brief similarities, is a clue that at least one of the two Matthew and Luke doesn't

¹⁶⁷ Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.429-437, Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp.360-367.

know what he is talking about. We can likely bump this number up to two if we discern why they are writing what they are writing. Such is Crossan's view of the Passion as well and, later, the resurrection. Difference means lack of information and its necessary companion, creation.¹⁶⁸

Accordingly, Crossan does not so much give an historical explanation for the final night and early morning of Jesus as a literary explanation of why we have a text in a book. As Casey amusingly puts this, Crossan has "a technique not an explanation".¹⁶⁹ Crossan's "technique" is to describe how and why we get the Passion narrative of Mark via a putative document he calls the Cross Gospel which we now find, according to Crossan, in the Gospel of Peter, a second century document of record. It is Crossan's view, based on his earlier research, that the Passion narrative we have now is a matter of "prophecy historicized". This is to say that Mark, the receiver of previous traditions (whether Cross Gospel or not is not important here) has woven of generalised facts a fictional account for his own purposes that relies on scriptural commentary and, indeed, commentary with scripture.¹⁷⁰ Mark, or any reasonable person, would be able to surmise likely events such as an arrest, some kind of judicial decision being made, Jesus' eventual crucifixion and, he would hope, a burial. He would then link them via the method Crossan describes in an explanatory way, explanatory, that is, for his audience and according to his purposes. Crossan does not think Mark knows (m)any details and he thinks Mark's driving motive is

¹⁶⁸ Crossan seems to enunciate the choice as "prophecy or history" (*The Historical Jesus*, p.368-372 and p.383 ff) and he chooses prophecy historicized as opposed to history prophesied. Crossan, as I have said, chooses a literary history for the description of these events rather than a narration of events in more reporterly guise (Casey's preferred option where he can argue for it). When it comes to talking about events the writers may not actually know the historical details about more generally, I would argue that where they differ here it tells us that a minimum of 3 out of 4 don't know what they are talking about. Both Casey and Crossan (the latter with the huge proviso of his putative *Cross Gospel* source) treat Mark as the source with priority within the biblical canon in any case. Casey wants to see it as reliable *if he can*, Crossan thinks it mostly fictional. We may suggest that if Mark is a fiction then they all are.

¹⁶⁹ Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.402.

¹⁷⁰ See Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke*, for his argument for a *Cross Gospel* source and his view that it underlies *all* the canonical death and resurrection narratives.

his own ideological and narrative requirements. Crossan does not imagine that any witness to putative historical events is going to turn up and say "I was there, it didn't happen like that." (And, it seems, none did.) But who would turn up and do that anyway for who, outside of Jesus, was present at all of the events of the Passion or of Jesus' last hours more historically described? No one. (This, by the way, is why some religious conservatives argue that JESUS HIMSELF is the actual source of the Passion and resurrection accounts!) On his arrest Mark reports Jesus' followers all run away save Peter who must fulfil his denial role.¹⁷¹ Yet even he is hanging around outside for only the first part of the unfolding events even if it happened at all.¹⁷² As Crossan states later of the burial, "Those who knew didn't care. Those who cared didn't know."¹⁷³ There is no historical witness to these putative events who could protest at a false depiction of them.

Meanwhile, in *Jesus of Nazareth*, Casey is describing the likelihood of Jesus having a "trial" before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council of leading Jews.¹⁷⁴ In the case of this "trial", and of the later one before Pilate, it is unlikely to have been anything so formal. Crossan, indeed, remarks off-handedly that it might be shocking how easily and casually Jesus could be despatched. There is no sense here that, historically, anything so grand as a trial took place in either scenario. The very fact that people had been sent to arrest Jesus means that, for those doing the sending, Jesus is to be got rid of. It only remains to secure the mechanics of having it happen. Mark has it that Jesus is innocent throughout, of course. The Jewish authorities are trying to make things up, he says, and Pilate is trying to get out of it which results in the fiction of Barabbas and fault for Jesus'

¹⁷¹ Mk 14:50.

¹⁷² Mk 14:54, 66-72.

¹⁷³ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.394.

¹⁷⁴ Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.440-445.

death not being any wrong he has done, nor any incrimination awarded to him by Pilate and so Rome, but by the Jewish crowd, the stooges of their leaders.¹⁷⁵ Mark does this because Jesus cannot die for no reason. It has to be somebody's fault. Jesus cannot just be minding his business praying with his friends in a quiet garden one night after a Passover meal and, next thing you know, he winds up hanging on a cross the next morning without explanation. Yet does Mark actually know what was said and done between the arrest of Jesus and his being nailed to a cross? Neither Casey nor Crossan really think so. Instead we have a narrative written at Mark's discretion which fictionalises the tale, one which takes care not to blame Rome (whose historical responsibility it must be) or admit any guilt on the part of Jesus.

Ironically, it is likely that both Casey and Crossan can agree on what Mark's motive is. Casey talks of "the theology of martyrdom which underpinned Jesus' view of his death"¹⁷⁶ and Crossan talks about "martyrdom vindicated" as a narrative theme in his explanation of how we get the literary description of Mark for the events.¹⁷⁷ If we recall discussions in regard to the Gospel of Thomas such as Stephen Patterson gives in several of his books on that gospel, we may also recall that, viewed from Edessa across the Euphrates where he sites this gospel's emergence, the canonical gospels looked very like the documents of martyrs.¹⁷⁸ And I think this is the case. Mark is a martyr's gospel in which Jesus as perfect and blameless example of the Christian martyr is displayed. He is a martyr who is there to show the Christian martyrs at the time of Mark (which I date to the 70s with Crossan and most scholars and not 40 CE as Casey) how to die. Thus, Mark

¹⁷⁵ In this respect Mark 15 is the heart of the fictional tale.

¹⁷⁶ Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.438.

¹⁷⁷ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp.389-391.

¹⁷⁸ See Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 84; Brill, 2013) for more on this.

writes a narrative which shows Jesus going to his death, unprotesting,¹⁷⁹ in this way. This is not so much dishonest history as meaningful fiction, true yet not true, it didn't happen but it constantly rehappens every time the story is told. The other three canonical gospels follow this basic plan as well. Thus, I disagree with Casey who finds Jesus' prayer in the garden at Gethsemane the night before where he requests that the cup be taken from him "authentic" and "uninventable".¹⁸⁰ Not only was no one there to hear it (although Casey maintains that Peter, James and John were within earshot) but *is it not a prayer which shows a martyr submitting his will to that of God?* "Yet not what I will but as you will."¹⁸¹ This is an ample reason to invent it if Mark's purpose is to depict a blameless Jesus whose faithfulness to God is a model for Mark and those he writes for, a community of Christians who could be martyred by Rome at any time. Casey, in my opinion, often lacks any historical imagination and Mark, in contrast, does not.

I take it, then, that up to the cross we have a martyr's fiction which demonstrates the exemplary character of Jesus. Crossan gets there by a literary route of a scripturally inspired search for meaning and putative texts and Casey gets there by historical deduction regarding the events narrated. But now we come to what happens next, we get to what happens to the body of Jesus.¹⁸² This, I think, is actually crucial to unlocking the whole thing. As a matter of bare historical judgment here Casey and Crossan agree: no one knew where Jesus was buried and, frankly, no one *should* know.¹⁸³ This is also the conclusion that I have come to. Romans typically left the corpses to rot on the crucifix. The flesh rotted away over time, a warning to would be future offenders, and when

179 Mk 15:5.

180 Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.438.

181 Mk 14:36.

182 We could get into the nitty gritty of if Jesus really was dead but I will leave that to those for whom skepticism is a way of life. If you want to argue that Jesus was really still alive then you are probably more likely to argue that he never existed at all in any case.

183 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.394, and Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.448-453.

there was no flesh left the bones fell to the ground, food for grateful scavenging dogs. At best bodies might be dumped in criminals' graves (by those who carried out the crucifixion not by their friends or family) and, on the outside, *someone with influence* might, just might, sue the Roman authority for permission to bury the body in a tomb of their choosing. But who can do this with Jesus? Anyone the gospels previously claim he was involved with would likely be crucified too if they approached Pilate due to guilt by association. Of course, various gospels try to get around this. Mark, as we see, invents Joseph of Arimathea,¹⁸⁴ a person in just such a position of influence (as well as women to see what he does). John adds in Jesus' old pal, Nicodemus, the Pharisee who skulked about at night so no one would see him.¹⁸⁵

In this, it does not matter that Crossan thinks Joseph of Arimathea, for very plausible reasons, is simply made up to progress the narrative in a way Mark requires and Casey finds him a plausible character of antiquity. They both agree that no one knew where Jesus was buried, no one, that is, who wrote gospels or claimed to be one of the followers of Jesus. (Casey, although finding Joseph plausible, thinks he buried Jesus in an anonymous criminal's grave not some fancy mausoleum of his own.) Remember, all Jesus' followers ran away. And this is the conundrum for if no one knew where Jesus was buried then *there can be no empty tomb* for no one would know where to go to find it. No one would even know if there was a tomb which is an unlikely scenario in any event due to the customary Roman crucifixion practices. The best evidence we have for this today is that we *still* do not know, with forensic certainty, where the imagined tomb of Jesus was. In a world in which pilgrims will besiege a statue that, it is claimed, weeps, would not the tomb of Jesus, the place from which he rose from the dead, be decked out in

184 Mk 15:42-47

185 Jn 19:39. Nicodemus' role does seem wholly narrative and stage-managed to this reader at least.

disco lights and tickets sold for high prices to see where he once lay if it was known where this was as an indisputable fact? Would not this site be a place of pilgrimage and veneration, the place from which Jesus rose? The gospels claim that his followers did know where it was. So what happened? Did they then inexplicably forget the most portentous site in (Christian) history so that today we are in the dark about it? Such a belief stretches credulity to breaking point.¹⁸⁶

The truth remains that Paul, an early witness to Christianity if not Jesus himself, does not mention an empty tomb at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15 with his recitation of what he received as primitive kerygma.¹⁸⁷ (I argue that this statement is written before any of the gospel accounts. Casey thinks Mark was written first.) Some believers will assert it is assumed but I prefer being explicit to assumption. Paul can be explicit when he wants to be. One would imagine he would be now if an empty tomb was part of the story and if one being found, which none could deny, was part of the history. If there had never been any written gospels with their tomb stories would any Christian of the time or since, Pauline or otherwise, have found that a stumbling block to their belief in a risen Jesus? Would lack of this argue against appearances of the risen Jesus that it is claimed some of them had and which were touted as proofs that Jesus was alive? Would no empty tomb trouble Paul who claimed an appearance of the risen Jesus for himself? The answer is a firm no and, as Casey shows in his concise but thorough argumentation going

186 Casey's sober, academic view is "it is a reasonable inference from the authentic parts of the Gospel tradition that our sources say nothing because they did not know, or because the story was too shameful for them to wish to tell it... I conclude that we do not know exactly where Jesus was buried. It is probable that he was buried in a common criminals' tomb in the general area of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre." Moreover, Casey argues that, "Mark's story of his burial... has been affected by early Christian belief in his Resurrection." (*Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.452-453)

187 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4 reads "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures".

over the resurrection beliefs current in Judaism of the time, these were many and various and not all required an empty tomb or a missing corpse.¹⁸⁸

Accordingly, it makes sense to me that Paul was happy to believe in the resurrection regardless of tombs and bodies which, in my view, was the form the earliest belief in the resurrection of Jesus took. Tomb stories came along after and are, therefore, definitively non-historical. As I have already mentioned, in my view no follower of Jesus, not one, knew what had happened to Jesus' body. There was no known tomb which some follower of Jesus just, luckily, happened to know the location of. This being so, the empty tomb being discovered historically in real time as the various (conflicting) stories of the gospels have it is simply not historically possible. Indeed, it is the lack of knowledge about a tomb on the part of any Jesus follower who cared (or pretty much anyone else) that gives narrative space for the stories which subsequently emerge. These stories, some taking place in Galilee (Mark and Matthew), others taking place in Jerusalem (Luke) and yet others in both places (John) cannot be coherently harmonised much as academic believers would like them to be. They are clearly written to order and to ideology and each creates problems for the others.¹⁸⁹ Jesus always appears to the faithful in ways that cannot be verified and in the one case of a more public appearance,

188 Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.466-473. Casey argues that "neither the earliest kerygmatic formulation, nor Paul himself, mentions the empty tomb" on p.459 and makes great play of the fact that believing scholars are inferring it largely from their own belief rather than history or the texts of the New Testament. However, as I'm sure Casey would have agreed, we must let the text speak for itself rather than filling in the blanks from other texts or from our own beliefs.

189 Perhaps this is why Crossan, in chapter 15 of *The Historical Jesus*, seems to go almost completely off piste when it comes to explaining the resurrection. He writes, by way of explanation, "Even a reader totally innocent of questions about source or genre notices a drastic change in moving from the passion and burial stories to the resurrection and apparition ones. More specifically, it is very simple to compose a single harmonized version of the former narratives up to the finding of the empty tomb but flatly impossible to compose one for the latter traditions. If all those accounts derived from composite memory and historical recall, it is quite remarkable that an almost hour-by-hour remembrance prevailed for the death and burial of Jesus but an almost total discrepancy prevailed for what was, I would presume, even more important, namely, the extraordinary return of Jesus from beyond the grave" (*The Historical Jesus*, p.395). From there, Crossan develops an argument that the resurrection appearances are actually about authority within the early communities of Jesus followers.

to 500 at once according to Paul writing to those in Corinth,¹⁹⁰ all four canonical gospels do not corroborate or even mention this incident which we should take as a powerful silent witness against its actuality. It is unthinkable that such an event would be left out if it were genuine for it would be a proof before the whole world and not just a few insiders. Such a singly attested event is, at best, highly dubious. Paul himself neither says when it was nor where it took place. It is a fiction not open to investigation, unattested anywhere else.

In his discussion of the resurrection appearances Casey latches onto something interesting. Noting that Matthew 28:17 reports that some of Jesus' closest disciples did not believe his resurrection, and then seem not to have taken much of an active role in the fledgling Christian movement after the demise of Jesus, he raises the prospect that the resurrection, far from being the *fait accompli* and universally recognised vindication of Jesus' character that Paul and the gospels largely present it as, was, historically, not quite as convincing as might be imagined. Indeed, that some did not believe at all or, at least, did not believe at first, seems a historical thread that is left obscured and undisturbed in the texts of the gospels.¹⁹¹ We must, of course, be careful. Nowhere more than in the death and resurrection accounts are the gospels more about myth, parable, allusion, fiction and meaning than in these events. The story of doubting Thomas in John, for example, reads more like object lesson for readers than historical report.¹⁹² Yet it could be the scandal behind the fictional history that, in fact, after Jesus was crucified

190 1 Corinthians 15:6.

191 Casey notes of Matthew's resurrection account, taken over from Mark's which ends abruptly with NO resurrection appearance at Mk 16:8, that "The most important point is however the comment that when Jesus appeared, 'some doubted' (Mt. 28.17)" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p.480) and he argues that "It must reflect the lack of faith in the Resurrection by some of the Eleven" (p.481). This leads him to suggest that "What is even more devastating is that this is the point at which the whole tradition of appearances of the risen Jesus begins to fall apart. Why do we not have accurate narrative accounts of genuine appearances of the risen Jesus? Why are we not told what happened when Jesus appeared to Cephas, over 500 brethren, and then Jacob and then all the apostles (1 Cor. 15.5-7)?" (ibid.). All fair questions.

192 Jn 20:24-29.

some did *not* believe he rose again, some of his closest followers who the gospels report as having been deliberately taught by Jesus exactly what would occur.¹⁹³ Some, perhaps those who received no visions of his return to life or appearances of him in the room with them, simply had no reason to believe Jesus was alive. It is quite reasonable to suggest, indeed, that they did not then just convince themselves that he was or “make it up”. As Casey is willing to believe, people can and do have visions or experience events in which those who have recently died do seem to appear to them.¹⁹⁴ But it would be quite another thing to suggest that people, contrary to all they know and believe, simply decide to believe something they have no evidence for and cannot bring themselves to believe. This would be bizarre and entails wilfully lying to oneself.

As I have written about previously, the only things necessary for Christianity to begin at this point are a belief that Jesus is alive (“proof”, whatever that means here, need not involve tombs or bodies) and no evidence to the contrary (such as his dead body being dragged out in front of them). That the body of Jesus had been disposed of in a criminals’ grave where no follower of his would ever find it and where no one moved to question a nascent Christian belief would look to disprove it (a ridiculous notion in any case) is very likely and the Romans who put it there would have forgotten about him and it there and then in any case. All that remains is for key followers such as Peter and John to be convinced he has risen, which we see from Acts 4:1-22 is the case, and Christianity can begin (as far as these believers are concerned, entirely authentically). But we should not imagine that everyone felt this way or had this experience. Some did *not* believe and disappear from the stage instead.

193 Cf. Lk 24:44. The question asked of Jesus in Acts 1:6 similarly implies prior teaching.

194 Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp.488-497. His conclusion on p.497 reads: “We should therefore conclude that Jesus’ closest followers had experiences which they interpreted as appearances of him after his death. These experiences, together with his predictions and their study of the scriptures, were instrumental in leading them to believe that God had raised him from the dead. These appearances fit into what is generally known of the experiences of bereaved people.”

We should also disbelieve those who tell us that convincing proofs of Jesus' resurrection are necessary in order for those attesting to them to later suffer and become martyrs for their faith. People ever since the first days after Jesus' death have found themselves able to believe in his resurrection (rightly or wrongly) based on no body, no tomb, no appearances and no personal testimony from those who claim to have known Jesus and to be able to speak about these things personally. Some of these same people have suffered and died for their beliefs just as much as any of Jesus' followers who did so in the first century. This exposes the claim that convincing and irrefutable demonstrations are necessary to ridicule since they manifestly aren't. What is needed is an event or a process, both subject to interpretation, which will convince those concerned. In Casey's mention of visions or appearances (much the same thing in this respect) we have ample scope to find the basis of Christian belief in the resurrection. This certainly seems enough for Paul whose whole activity is based on a vision and the abiding conviction it motivates. Paul lists his vision with those of others in 1 Corinthians 15 and we can rightly imagine that similar visionary experiences (which become interpreted as physical proofs) were the basis of their faith too.

Accordingly, I propose the following understanding of Jesus' death and events following. Jesus' activities in the Temple are interpreted as threatening of Jewish institutions, and their human administrators. Jesus makes enemies by his actions (whether deliberately or as a consequence of them). One of his followers, Judas, is bribed to help facilitate his arrest. Jesus is arrested on Passover night by those sent from the Jewish authorities who manage to convince the Roman authorities they pass him on to that Jesus is a bandit, a political challenger to Rome and one who threatens the Roman peace. This indicates they would like him killed, a punishment they cannot hand

down or administer. Jesus' religious beliefs and practices that have been demonstrated in his ministry would not here concern the Roman authority but his Temple disturbance would. It was likely made much of by those pushing for Jesus' punishment. Jesus is sentenced to crucifixion. It is as well that all his closest followers have run away as, otherwise, it's highly likely some of them may have been crucified as well. This explains why they never come back. They have fled and are either in hiding or have gone back to Galilee. Jesus is scourged, which was normal practice, and sent to be crucified. There is and was no Barabbas and Pilate did not try to barter with the crowds. Jesus dies on the cross like many victims of Roman law in Palestine before and after him.

Thereafter, he is likely buried in an unmarked criminals' grave and very likely with others. No one but those soldiers who buried him knew where this was and they didn't care about Jesus, or where they had put him, at all. Consequently, there is no known tomb of Jesus, as remains the case today, and the empty tomb and stories relating to it are all pious fabrications, the results of fictions motivated by visions some but not all of his closest followers had in the days and weeks after Jesus' death which we may regard as the beginning of Christian faith. Joseph of Arimathea is, therefore, a fiction made up to explain why Jesus might have an unused tomb to be laid in and to be an advocate who could ask for his body in the first place. Joseph's tomb was simply somewhere he could subsequently be found by his followers who could give convenient witness to his resurrection but which could also cover for the fact that, in actuality, none of them had known what happened to his body.

That, I think, is something like an historical outline of what happened that underlies the Christian sources that are the only sources we have for these events in any imagined

detail. The gospels themselves, and even the Christian kerygma of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, are fictions laid over these historical events like a gauze. They are faith-infused stories which seek to make meaning out of events, many of which events were unknown even to those who would claim in life to have been Jesus' closest friends and confidants. In this respect both Casey and Crossan, in their chapters on the resurrection stories, are right to point out that what matters now in the gospels that relate these tales are the Christian community and who has authority within it.¹⁹⁵ What better apostolic warrant could one have than a meeting with a risen saviour? Such is what Paul claims for himself even as he does for others in Corinthians. Matthew has a post-resurrection commission to those remaining of the Twelve and assurance that this Jesus will be always with believers until the end of the age.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, this question of "what time it was" and where we are now in some putative calendar of events becomes mightily apparent. In Luke-Acts at this point Jesus is asked if the kingdom shall now come and in blatant contrast to his earthly ministry this post-resurrection Jesus states that it is not anyone's business but God's.¹⁹⁷ In this I think we catch just a whiff of an earthly ministry of Jesus in which the kingdom was "at hand" but now, post-resurrection, it is all a big surprise and no one knows what will happen or when.

This is the faultline, the seam, at which we pass from the ministry of the Jewish Jesus to the Christianity of a largely gentile Roman world. It very much gives off an air of, if I may say so, making it up as you go along. Of course, the winners write the history and

195 So Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.498: "The second major point of these stories is to function as revelations by the risen Jesus. For this reason, they contain brief statements and instructions which legitimate the most important beliefs and practices of the early churches... At this level, even the synoptic Gospels are classic examples of the social memory of a large community, because they have been written with the current needs of Christian communities in mind." The first "major point" is to legitimate the resurrection itself in Casey's view. Crossan's view is more complex in that he argues that the nature miracles in the gospels are "creedal statements about ecclesiastical authority," the resurrection being "the supreme nature miracle" (*The Historical Jesus*, p.404).

196 Mt 28:16-20.

197 Acts 1:6-7.

perfectly retroject the victory of their beliefs into it. But we may conceive that the various histories the intracanonial gospels have written are useful fictions that hide who Jesus was in life and make instructive, exemplary fictions of his death. They are now, after their archetype, the gospel of Mark, martyr's fictions intended to strengthen the faithful who, largely living within the Roman empire, were subject to its whims and persecutions. Jesus acts as exemplary martyr in the Christian gospel narrative even as, in Mark at least, his death acts as witness that "truly this man was the son of God" (Mk 15:39) before Rome and the gentiles within the empire who had become the main breeding ground for new Christian recruits. This is in distinction to the ministry of Jesus which was largely (but not exclusively) amongst and aimed at those within the cultural bounds of Judaism.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Thus the sense of the Crossan quotation at the head of this chapter and of his suggestion that Mark's passion account is framed by the gentile witness to Jesus at Mk 15:39 and the unnamed likely Jewish woman at Mk 14:3-9. Cf. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.416.

7. The Jesus Fiction (with a Postscript on “Human Meaning-Making”)

“Scholars in the history and sociology of religion do not account for social formations and their myths (or ideologies) by appeal either to a single cause (“origin”) or to the priority of persuasion (“belief”) in matters of social attraction, conversion, commitment, and cultural change.” Burton L. Mack

“I believe there is less here than meets the eye.” Robert M. Price

So far in this book¹⁹⁹ I have looked at the gospels as myth and parable, looked at possible sources of material for these gospels, ones which, in themselves, do not give an intracanonial view of Jesus and I have appraised the death and resurrection narratives of the gospels, primarily that of Mark which is the first canonical written account of this, as fiction laid over historical fixed points. Meanwhile, in a parallel track that I regarded as interludes to the main task, I have asked readers to consider an historical inventory of all the Jesus tradition we have, narrowed this down to a few select sources and argued, on the basis of these sources, that Jesus was historically an itinerant wanderer preaching the kingdom of God, a kind of Jewish Cynic, if you will. Given that all this theorizing essentially amounts to an argument that the gospels, and the Christian Gospel, are not truthful history about Jesus but are self-sustaining fictions which justify their beliefs and their existence, it now falls to me to explain how we get from Jewish Cynic Jesus, a figure who saw himself within Judaism within the Hellenistic world, to Jesus, the

199 The book referred to is *The Gospel of No One*, a book in which I discussed myth and parable, fiction and history, and also provided primers to the putative gospel “Q”, a suggested source of both Matthew and Luke, and the Gospel of Thomas, a real gospel first found complete in Egypt in 1945. I also mimicked John Dominic Crossan in working on my own “inventory” of historical Jesus material. I have chosen not to include some of that material in this book but such issues will be addressed in this book in later chapters, including both Q and Thomas. Also included in that former text was the beginning of my working through a thesis of a Jewish Cynic Jesus as a construction of my own. Traces of that will be found especially in the last chapter of the present volume.

Christian saviour figure, son of God and messiah. This is to say that it is not enough to describe Jesus; one must also explain Christianity.

Since I think that Jesus was not as the gospels decide him to be I come to the conclusion that he has been made a myth of. He is thus entwined in various kinds of stories, fictions and parables which seek both to cover his historical tracks whilst also laying down a myth of origins for Christianity generally. I do not think of any of this as particularly malicious since it is only charitable to imagine that most concerned did this quite unconsciously. They simply wrote about their own understanding of Jesus and those of others in the communities around them. Gospels are primarily community products and, as such, they validate the views of groups of people rather than inspired individuals. No one person would write a gospel their community would outright reject which sets the community as the arbitrating force regarding what is in a gospel. But we should take seriously the view that with such subject matter and in areas of such import only mythical and parabolic forms in the end sufficed for the stories they had to tell. Put simply: *only fiction was sufficient to the task of communicating the truths these people thought they had to share*. Mere historical report would have achieved nothing - even if we believe they knew the history to report it.

Therefore, in this chapter I want to address Christianity as myth-making, as fiction-creating, as story-telling. It is my abiding belief that the Jesus we find in narrative gospels is a fiction and that he has been rewritten to service the needs of communities of people who have come to give him special status and world altering significance. Accordingly, my guides here must be those who also see Jesus, and the Christianity that is named after him but was little to do with him, as fictional and as the creation of

Christian communities. Both Burton L. Mack and Robert M. Price are such scholars. Mack, in addition, has also been one who has viewed Jesus historically as a kind of Cynic sage whereas Price has argued in the past that the stories about Jesus become so overwhelming that his physical presence may entirely disappear into story as if he never existed.

In taking these guides it should not be imagined that I just fawningly agree with them. Indeed, in *The Posthistorical Jesus* I already wrote that I had rejected Price's sometimes mooted notion that Jesus never existed. However, what both these writers do, and many others do not, is explain why Christianity exists, and why its pictures of Jesus as fiction exist, aside from the believer's basis that "its all actually true" due to the great harmonizing effort they make. So it is for me to integrate the insights of Mack and Price into my own unfolding research and to make sense of them as best I can within the notion of Jesus as fiction about the world, Christianity as fiction about the world and "world" as a fiction about our existence. To make an attempt at that I shall start by examining Mack's book *The Christian Myth* from 2001 before moving to look at Price's book *Deconstructing Jesus* from 2000 and its later follow up *The Christ Myth Theory and Its Problems* from 2011.²⁰⁰

200 Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic and Legacy* (Continuum, 2001), Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Prometheus Books, 2000), *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* (American Atheist Press, 2011). Mack's New Testament work generally has been to uncover the historical myth-making of the original Christian communities and he has contributed three books of note in that line of thinking which are *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Augsburg Fortress, 1988), *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (HarperCollins, 1993) and *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (HarperCollins, 1995). Price publishes endlessly and of further note here is his book *The Historical Bejeezus: What A Long, Strange Quest Its Been* (American Atheist Press, 2013).

Burton Mack and The Christian Myth

Burton Mack's book *The Christian Myth* starts with a problem common, in his view, to both the Quest of the Historical Jesus and New Testament studies. This problem is the four Christian gospels of the New Testament for, whether their contents are regarded as reliable history or not, their narrative framework always remains intact as the context for understanding Jesus and his first followers right through to those who produced the books themselves. In this respect, Mack indicts the entire historical Quest for Jesus which set out to separate a historical figure from his literary accoutrements. He indicts it for not agreeing on any textual database from which to work historically and methodologically and for myriad "historical" profiles of Jesus, none of which account for all "the many figures of Jesus imagined and produced by early Christians," even suggesting that "No reconstruction of the historical Jesus has done or can do that."²⁰¹ He also indicts the Quest for never having been able to link the teaching or sayings of Jesus with his crucifixion, something that, for him, indicates that "something is wrong." (This is to find an answer to the question, "What about what Jesus habitually said and/or did GOT HIM KILLED?" But even that question is to assume that it was these things which did get him killed rather than something else. Can we actually know what did?)

Mack goes on to suggest that this might mean our historical and textual basis for reconstructing Jesus is off or our historical and textual basis for reconstructing the crucifixion is off - or both.²⁰² He asks the provocative question: "What if both sets of data are inadequate and incompatible because they are the products of early Christian myth-making?" His fourth and final indictment of the Quest is that its purpose for the vast

²⁰¹ Mack, *The Christian Myth*, p.36.

²⁰² Ibid., p.37.

majority of participants is, and always has been, ill-conceived where this has been to rejuvenate or revivify Christian faith or self-understanding. He suggests that the Christian Jesus is precisely the gospel Jesus which already has four canonical witnesses in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Mack suggests that we cannot bracket these gospels to do historical study of Jesus because the historical Jesus cannot account for the gospels and because the mythical gospel narratives have such a powerful cultural position that no alternative construction has the ability to challenge them.

What Mack thinks we need to do is something rather different and it means setting aside the gospels completely in a narrative sense. Indeed, "the New Testament texts are not only inadequate for a Jesus quest, they are data for an entirely different phenomenon. They are not the mistaken and embellished memories of the historical person, but the myths of origin imagined by early Christians seriously engaged in their social experiments. They are data for early Christian mythmaking."²⁰³ Mack nails the coffin lid shut on historical Jesus study through these documents when he follows this up with "Early Christians were not interested in the *historical* Jesus. They were interested in something else." The historical Jesus game in biblical studies is thus argued to be a misappropriation of texts for nefarious purposes, a huge misstep, a misguided mistake, a playing along with the mode of thought which gives us the Christian Myth in the first place and so simply results in new myths.

Mack moves on to make a case for "a Cynic-like Jesus" as part of his argument for why the gospels need to be set aside, a case I have previously made myself in different ways to Mack and also for different purposes (see my final chapter in this book). Mack also notes, as I did, that "the myth of Jesus *Christos* was based on the logic of a martyrdom"

²⁰³ Ibid., p.40.

which I supported in my last chapter. Mack argues that “the synoptic gospels can be understood as a late first century merger of Jesus and *Christos* traditions.”²⁰⁴ He places importance in this picture which incorporates martyrdom being compiled *after* the Jewish-Roman War of 66-73 CE since this leaves the period *before* it free of this synoptic picture which is primarily instigated by the Gospel of Mark, Matthew and Luke being regarded as expansions of this narrative. Mark holds a pre-eminent place, according to Mack, because as the first narrative outworking of the person of Jesus it has no challenger with which to compare it. It is thus accepted by Christian adherents and critics alike. Given that Mack identifies what he calls “Jesus traditions” before the war, he looks to these to challenge the post-war Markan martyrdom narrative which has held sway ever since, wiping out a more diverse and nebulous history in the process.

These Jesus traditions Mack identifies with the Sayings Gospel Q which he regards as a triple layered document (i.e. Q1, Q2 and Q3, redactional layers of said putative document that take place and agglomerate over time and which involves rearranging, adding and changing the material involved in this process) such as that outlined by John Kloppenborg in his discipline-leading scholarly analysis of the document.²⁰⁵ For Mack, Q1, the earliest putative layer of Q, displays “a profile that is clearly comparable to popular Cynicism.”²⁰⁶ This includes themes such as critique of riches, critique of hypocrisy, voluntary poverty, a fearless and carefree attitude to life, etiquette for begging, severance of family ties and what constitutes authentic discipleship. I can only agree with Mack here that these seem recognisably Cynic themes in the main which contain “more than a hint of social critique or countercultural lifestyle.”²⁰⁷ Mack suggests,

204 Ibid., p.41.

205 See particularly *The Formation of Q* (Fortress, 1987) and *Excavating Q* (Fortress, 2000) by John Kloppenborg for more on this as well as Mack’s own *The Lost Gospel*.

206 Mack, *The Christian Myth*, p.45.

207 Ibid., p.44.

however, that in Q1 this Cynic ethic is already starting to be changed by those preserving it into a “standard for some social formation”. This reminds me that Jesus himself wrote nothing and that any texts about him are always preserved and written by someone else, primary evidence for *them* but not necessarily for *him*. *With texts we are already at least one remove from Jesus himself*. Mack adds to the Cynic themes of Q1 with some sayings of Jesus from the pre-Markan material which Mark has incorporated into his text narratively. Mack does this to suggest that the original Cynic humour and cleverness of Jesus, the way he bests his interlocutors in verbal combat, is, in their narrative elaboration by Mark, being turned into something more serious, principled and rule-based. Mack wants to know if we can historically explain why this is.

His suggestion appears to be “Jesus schools” perhaps located in Galilee. This, of course, is not an idea the traditional construal of Christian origins would support but then Mack does not think that traditions such as those Cynic-flavoured ones he identifies in Q1 are, in the first place, “documentation *for* the historical Jesus.” Instead, he sees them as witnesses to the Jesus schools, “groups that thought of their Cynic-like discourse as “the teachings of Jesus”.”²⁰⁸ In this, of course, these writers and preservers were active participants and we can expect that they would seek to clarify and apply them accordingly. This is not a traditional view and, indeed, it is one which threatens certain cherished beliefs about Christian origins with its image of “Jesus the Cynic”. Mack criticises opponents of this thesis which, were we all simply historically interested, should be treated just as any other thesis and to similar standards of proof. Yet Mack calls its critics apologists and regards them as those protecting their theological interests.²⁰⁹ Often those who are against the Cynic thesis are also against Q as a source

208 Ibid., p.58.

209 Ibid., p.55.

document and for similar reasons, it undoes their nice, neat, traditional understandings. Yet, for Mack, “the real reasons... have to do with the desire to protect the traditional gospel view of Christian origins.”²¹⁰ Mack responds to those who say that a “Cynic philosopher” could not have been responsible for Christianity by pointing out that this assumes that Jesus *was* responsible for Christianity and that Christian belief started *with* the historical Jesus. Mack thinks that the historical Jesus *wasn’t* responsible for Christian belief and that the idea that Jesus was a Cynic is *not* the result of a quest to find the person who initiated Christianity. Indeed, Mack is not sure we can get behind those in these Jesus schools who regarded their Cynic sayings as the teachings of Jesus at all.

So what Mack thinks we need after his discussions of the Quest as a whole and the Cynic Jesus thesis is *a redescription of Christian origins* because, put quite simply, “The gospel accounts erased the pre-gospel histories.”²¹¹ For Mack the idea that Jesus came to earth, taught things, performed miracles, performed world-saving antics on the cross and initiated the church is history “according to Christian imagination.”²¹² Even in the New Testament, and through the work of scholars to clarify the histories of things such as the gospels Q and Thomas, we can see that the activity of those claiming allegiance to Jesus was various and not singular. There was more than one group and these groups didn’t necessarily agree on how to proceed. Some, I suggested in a previous chapter following Maurice Casey, may even have simply stopped believing in Jesus as his resurrection was a step too far. But those who did believe were not just one big, happy family. Following Jesus after he had gone was pluralist and sometimes conflicting. It was all very *human*. And yet, complains Mack, a Luke-Acts way (or, on a grander scale, a Luke-Acts-Eusebius

210 Ibid., p.56.

211 Ibid., p.59.

212 Ibid.

way)²¹³ of viewing Christian origins still persists even though, for example, the two volume work Luke-Acts simply forgets Galilee, Jesus' own home, after Jesus leaves for Jerusalem to be crucified.²¹⁴ So the gospels remain the problem and Mack wonders if scholarship is just hanging on... and on... hoping that one day, against all hope, it might be proved right. After all, its there so it must be right, right? As a demonstration of what Mack regards as the inability of the gospels to account for questions about Christian origins he lists thirty questions that he thinks the gospels cannot answer adequately. These extend from "the notion that Jesus was a reformer of Judaism" through "the historical data and reasons for the crucifixion of Jesus" to "the intention to form an alternative society".²¹⁵ The problem is that whenever questions appear that get too close to questioning the gospel story the New Testament guild of largely Christian scholars close ranks and take up defensive positions. They, as the gospels, simply think Jesus was special. The myth gets perpetuated again, the gospel picture, and the gospel myth, is reinforced.

Mack correctly diagnoses here that New Testament scholars often see their activity as some kind of science or professional discipline when often it is little more than apologetic faith wearing an academic outfit, and an outfit that is actually a disguise, that of the humanistic scholar. He says that, "Interpreting the New Testament as a quest for contemporary theological relevance is a sophisticated form of mythic thinking. Its pursuit is not appropriate within the academy."²¹⁶ Yet that is what many use the academy

213 Eusebius of Caesarea produced a famous ecclesiastical history in the early 4th century which coincided with Constantine's proclamation of religious tolerance of Christianity throughout the Roman empire. It claimed to chart the history of Christianity from its beginnings until his own time. See Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (Penguin Classics, 1989).

214 Minus one mention of Galilee in passing in Acts 9:31: "Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."

215 The questions are worth considering in full. See Mack, *The Christian Myth*, pp.61-62.

216 Ibid., p.64.

for. It is not a pursuit of knowledge, much less of a truly historical kind; it is the defence of the Gospel, a completely different thing. Mack is clear that a necessary redescription of Christian origins cannot stand on the basis of this kind of scholarship, the gospels or the New Testament.

One specific problem Mack identifies is that New Testament scholarship generally, which is largely Christian, has an inadequate theory of religion to work with, one based in the action of a god and his special envoy, Jesus. Looked at in a more partisan way, it seems that Christian scholars are often like their fellow Christian adherents more generally: Christianity is special because it is true and all the other religions are not special because they are false. We saw already in a previous chapter how David Friedrich Strauss felt about such ignorant notions. Here Mack argues for “Christian origins as a thoughtful, collective human construction, instead of the result of human response to the action of a god.” This, he thinks, is a theory that will be “firmly anchored in social and cultural anthropology, capable of sustaining a conversation with the humanities”.²¹⁷ In short, it is time to put away the special pleading and treat Christian origins as the origins of any religion for “the point is nothing less than the construction of a theory of religion”.²¹⁸ This approach sees religion as a social construct and a matter of social formation. It asks why people create, and what people get out of, the myths they create. It asks about the rituals religious communities participate in. It recognises that mythmaking and social formation go together and it takes these seriously as constructive and thoughtful activities. It is, we may say, social history not revelation and Mack wants “to develop a theory of religion that can explain Christian origins without recourse to miracles and divine intervention.”²¹⁹

217 Ibid., p.68.

218 Ibid., p.74.

219 Ibid., p.83.

Mack's three major works in the field of New Testament studies, noted above, have contributed to this project. These works, on Mark, Q and the New Testament generally, have in each case been interested not in some special figure, the historical Jesus, who acts as impetus to all that follows but in the texts concerned and in seeing them not as evidence for the putative special figure behind them but as primary evidence for the communities that created them. So, in fact, Mack has sought to explain these documents and the communities that created them in social terms as social phenomena within a wider understanding of religion generally rather than as some special case unlike any other. Mack, in fact, does not even conceive of himself as a "historical Jesus scholar" since this is to play along with the Christian mythical model he is rather attempting to redescribe via the myth and ritual of the early Christian communities. Mack's strategy is to see these communities through the lens of a social theory of religion which sees their mythmaking activities and ritual practices "as variants of social interests common for all human social formations".²²⁰

This results in Mack's actual interest and scholarly project being that of (re)describing early Christian social formations, a shift away from the biblical and traditional model which relies on the action of a supernatural figure and the necessary human response. Put more simply, he is interested in human meaning-making, "a redescription of Christian origins based on theories of social interest" since for Mack "the quest for the historical Jesus will not suffice" to explain them.²²¹ Mack thinks they need to be explained since, in his analysis of "material from the early Jesus movement" he finds "no mention of Jesus as a messiah or (the) *Christos*, no critique of Second Temple Judaism, no reference to a crucifixion, and no hint of a resurrection." This, thinks Mack, "makes it very difficult to

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., p.101.

link the evidence from the early Jesus movements with what other New Testament texts say about the death of Jesus *christos* or Jesus the crucified Christ.”²²² Indeed, it leaves a conundrum and confronts us with the question of how we get the New Testament if the history is not as its documents would have us believe. Mack’s suggestion is that these documents only make sense as fiction and because they are fiction we must seek to understand why they chose these fictions and how they fitted into the social understandings of those who wrote them. It is Mack’s abiding belief that “social formation and collective identity were high on the list of motivations and preoccupations”²²³ for these people, something which is not about “the aura of the exceptional and unique”.²²⁴ If we want to understand properly we must forget understanding Jesus and Christian origins as if it were one special and unique case. And that means ditching the gospels’ narrative outline and the Quest for the Historical Jesus in favour of something better too.

Robert M. Price Deconstructs Jesus

One may view the last three chapters as having travelled along a continuum as we progressed. We started those chapters with Strauss who delineated large portions of the gospels as myth. We then moved to John Dominic Crossan who was ready to call parts of the gospels myth or prophecy historicized and, eventually, to move to a position where he describes the gospels whole and entire as parable. We might describe these two together as contributing to a view which exchanges historical reference for literary expression. Skipping over an investigation of two documents interested in Jesus but not validated in themselves by the Christian canon and of the way the key Christian events

222 Ibid., p.102.

223 Ibid., p.107.

224 Ibid., p.106.

came to be described inside that canon (not least in terms of death, burial and resurrection which I covered but which Q and Thomas do not), we get to this chapter. Here we have seen that Burton Mack sees narrative gospels as myths but, more than that, myths which are evidence for their composers and preservers rather than their imagined historical referents. Mack does not quite lose sight of the historical Jesus in the fog of myth but he is less interested in that barely knowable figure than the more evidential Christian communities. And then we come to my current subject, Robert Price. Price is, perhaps, the most scholarly example of someone who puts his name to the view that there may never have been a Jesus at all.²²⁵ This is not merely a matter of literary analysis of the New Testament, although he does much of this, but of the fact that Price thinks we can explain pretty much everything written about Jesus by referring to other things such that the need for a person called Jesus who once existed disappears. We can deconstruct the stories about Jesus until nothing but stories is left.

Price sees himself as serving on the same side which Strauss served on and regards him as a scholarly forebear. He chides Crossan for not having the courage of his convictions as one who explains away large parts of the gospels but then refuses the seemingly necessary consequential act of removing Jesus from the stage entirely. (Crossan is adamant there *was* a historical Jesus even though much of his analysis removes any genuine historical knowledge about him.) Price praises Mack for perhaps being that most honest of New Testament scholars anywhere near the mainstream who is ready to call the gospels myth whole and entire and to focus not on an historical Jesus but on the mythmaking activities of the Jesus communities as part of an understanding of their

²²⁵ Price holds PhDs in Systematic Theology and in New Testament and has been a member of the Jesus Seminar, although not always one who was comfortable with its choices. He is thus not someone that critics of his position can dismiss as “uncredentialed” as often seems to be the first line of attack of those who espouse the view that Jesus may never have existed at all. Price is often as disdainful of this snobbish view as he is of the arguments of those who clearly believe Jesus existed *because* they believe in Jesus.

social formation. He thinks that Crossan and Mack together “repristinate some of the most radical critical positions long ago dismissed by mainstream scholars, namely that there was no historical Jesus, or that the New Testament Jesus is a composite figure based on various biblical and historical prototypes.”²²⁶ Yet Price notices that even Mack finds a new historical lodestone in Q1, a first putative layer of the Sayings Gospel Q, which preserves the remembrance of a Cynic-like Jesus. So in the end Price thinks that even Mack has not gone far enough and that he too resists the logic of his own conclusions. Mack finds a Cynic Jesus whereas Price thinks that all he has found is undeniably Cynic teachings *attributed to* a Jesus figure. Clearly, a view like this from Price would affect my views as well for it puts *any* construction of Jesus in question. Yet Price thinks that Mack’s Q1 lodestone is as much evidence for the *invention* of a mighty forebear as it is for the actuality of that forebear.

So with Price we reach “Jesus at the vanishing point” or “Jesus Christ as the effect of Christianity not the cause”. “There may once have been an historical Jesus,” writes Price, “but for us there is one no longer. If he existed, he is forever lost behind the stained glass curtain of holy myth.”²²⁷ Price’s case is built on the fact that none of us have a time machine. We do not *know* what happened 2,000 years ago in Galilee, in Jerusalem, in the wider Levant or the Roman empire. To truly know, to trace the lines of development, the motivations of thought and action, to see the nails being driven home and the crowds buffeting Jesus, we would have to be there in the midst of them. Lacking these things, we must work by analogy and deduction from things more known and more knowable. This is to say that “We deal only in probabilities.”²²⁸ What we don’t do is believe something merely because it is there. “Must we gravely admit it is entirely likely that the

226 Price, *The Historical Bejeezus*, pp.47-48.

227 Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, p.23.

228 Ibid., p.25.

Son of Zeus killed the Hydra just because someone once said so?” asks Price, not unreasonably.²²⁹ He is convinced that genuine humanistic research carried out by the academy is a matter of analogy to things known and of probability not certainty. The genuine historian can rarely be certain. She must take her best guess, the one thought most supportable. So, for example, to reject miracles is not an example of some unsupportable “anti-supernatural bias”. It is to work by analogy to the fact that today we do not see the dead raised or the sick cured at a touch and to say that, in all probability, people 2,000 years ago didn’t either.

Price argues that if the Criterion of Dissimilarity²³⁰ is properly applied then *no* Jesus material must be regarded as authentic to him for, put simply, that anything at all was preserved by the first Christians was evidence of its usefulness to them and, after the tenets of Form Criticism,²³¹ that method used with such success by pre-eminent 20th century New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, must therefore find a home in the life of the early church. It is thus not dissimilar and is struck out of any historical Jesus database.²³² This leaves us with nothing from Jesus himself. It leaves us with what Bultmann himself called the “that” of Jesus but not the “what” (which is all he thought was important anyway).²³³ This is to almost expunge him from the historical record, to leave us with words and deeds ascribed to a phantom who is not that far from having no

229 Ibid., p.26.

230 This is a criterion used in historical Jesus research which I also referred to in chapter four where I discussed the lack of controls over the data for the historical Jesus. In classic formulation this criterion locates Jesus material where it cannot be described as like contemporary Jewish material of his time or useful to the early Christians that follow him. It thus seeks to isolate Jesus from his surroundings and say what is unique about him.

231 Form Criticism seeks to determine a literary unit's original form and the historical context of the literary tradition generally. It classifies units of text by literary pattern and then attempts to trace each type to its period of oral transmission.

232 Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, p.29.

233 Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (ET; Harper San Francisco, 1976) from 1921 was a classic text of 20th century gospel criticism and Bultmann dispersed his religious views, which were largely dismissive of historical detail for faith, through books like *Jesus and The Word* (ET; C. Scribner's sons, 1934) written in 1926 and his *Theology of the New Testament* (ET; One Volume Edition; Prentice Hall, 1970) written between 1948 and 1953.

substance at all. In such a scenario Price regards those who still cling to Jesus as history as those working with “after-the-fact rationalizations of a position held ultimately on other, purely emotional and subjective, grounds.”²³⁴ In the minds of modern Christian, and even some non-Christian, scholars who are conservative when it comes to the gospel narratives, Price diagnoses that “Jesus Christ functions, for instance, in an unnoticed and equivocal way, as shorthand for a vast system of beliefs and institutions on whose behalf he is invoked.”²³⁵

So Jesus is part of the cultural furniture, much as Mack suggested, and this dominant position is hard to dislodge simply because he has been so well integrated into life itself that to remove him has emotional consequences and is experienced as a loss. Price, as Schweitzer did, believes “that every ‘Life of Jesus’ book is that scholar’s own Gospel of Jesus, his or her own Christology.”²³⁶ He thinks the modern upsurge of interest in “the historical Jesus” and the many books claiming to find the true Jesus of history “clever polemical *constructions*. Pretending to be unvarnished *nature*, or brute fact, they are really sophisticated creations of *culture* like the culture creations they are employed to debunk.”²³⁷ He notes “how few scholars come out the way Albert Schweitzer did: with a Jesus that embarrassed him”²³⁸ and that those poor scholarly souls who appeal to “scholarly consensus” forget that “Consensus is no criterion”.²³⁹ Copernicus was right when the great and the good insisted he recant his theory that the earth was not the centre of God’s creation. And consensus had nothing to do with it. But what actually is an appeal to “scholarly consensus” when the guild of historical Jesus and Christian origins

²³⁴ Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*, p.11.

²³⁵ Ibid., p.14.

²³⁶ Ibid., p.15.

²³⁷ Ibid., p.17.

²³⁸ Ibid., p.18.

²³⁹ Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, p.30.

scholars is made up almost entirely of Christian believers of one sort or another? A kangaroo court? It is certainly not an impartial audience.

Price thinks, in fact, that we currently have a scholarly “embarrassment of riches” regarding Jesus. He writes:

*“As a brief survey will suggest, many of the current historical Jesus options are quite plausible and make good sense of a number of gospel texts. None violates historical method. All are the product of serious and deep scholarship. But what these learned labors have yielded may be called an embarrassment of riches. There are just too many that make too much sense, and that fact, it seems to me, vitiates the compelling force of any one of them.”*²⁴⁰

He continues:

*“Jesus simply wears too many hats in the gospels—exorcist, healer, king, prophet, sage, rabbi, demigod, and so on. The Jesus Christ of the New Testament is a composite figure. Today's historical Jesus theories agree in recognizing that fact, but they part company on the question of which might be the original core, and which the secondary accretions.”*²⁴¹

Price paints a picture of an historical Jesus scholarship which, by analogy to the Christian perception of the canonical gospels, knows so much but cannot choose between the different views of what it thinks it knows... and so it settles instead for an untenable “harmony”, where harmonization is always the preferred last resort of those who cannot

²⁴⁰ Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*, p.18.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

make a choice about Jesus. It could be that so much incompatible information and so many singular pictures of Jesus may be thought to cancel each other out and point to some basic flaw in our historical thinking but, no, instead we simply put all the creative history into a pot and choose a bit here, a bit there, and make of it an unrealistic harmony which none of the individual pictures validated at all in the first place. So, as Price concludes, "The historical Jesus (if there was one) might well have been a messianic king, or a progressive Pharisee, or a Galilean shaman, or a magus, or a Hellenistic sage. But he cannot very well have been all of them at the same time."²⁴² So it is also reasonable to conclude some basic flaw in the makeup of the historical Jesus academy: "Most even of critical scholars studying Jesus are at least liberal Christians, and one suspects they cannot bring themselves to stop at agnosticism about the historical Jesus."²⁴³

On this basis Price proclaims himself to be describing a scholarly "Jesus agnosticism."²⁴⁴ He says that "a Jesus who could take so many forms so readily had no real form to begin with, we may say that a "historical Jesus" capable of being portrayed with nearly equal plausibility as a magician, a revolutionary, a Cynic sage, an apocalyptic prophet, and so on, has no true and certain form at all!"²⁴⁵ His ultimate conclusion is that "the original is irrecoverable"²⁴⁶ and he openly sees this as the logical conclusion of Burton Mack's work, work Price is prepared to push to such a logical conclusion even where Mack is not quite able to himself. And this is before we mention anything about the fact that there is "no mention of a miracle working Jesus in secular sources"²⁴⁷ or that "the epistles, earlier

²⁴² Ibid., pp.22-23.

²⁴³ Ibid., p.23.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p.25.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p.24.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, p.31.

than the gospels, do not evidence a recent historical Jesus”²⁴⁸ in Price’s view. “All the epistles seem to know is a Jesus Christ, Son of God, who came into the world to die as a sacrifice for human sin and was raised by God and enthroned in heaven” he writes.²⁴⁹ Added to this, Price goes to some length to demonstrate just how much of the canonical gospels can be seen as pious rewrites of the Old Testament.²⁵⁰ To be sure, the pedantic could likely pick this apart piece by piece, giving alternative historical constructions, as I am sure some apologists have done, but as an interpretational scheme it at least raises the question of how the gospel material is related to an historical forebear *or if it is at all*. So it is no wonder that Price regards the logical conclusion of the work of Strauss, Crossan and Mack as the notion that Jesus is made of fiction and a Jesus made of fiction never had any flesh, was never pierced by nails and, in fact, never even walked the earth or breathed its air.

It is much better, thinks Price, to see that “The Jesus story as attested in the epistles shows strong parallels to Middle Eastern religions based on the myths of dying and rising gods.”²⁵¹ If we see this we might then come to the conclusion that “There is no more reason to posit a core experience (for the first Christians) than in the case of Attis. And yet, for all this, there still might have been a historical Jesus, even if there was no historical Easter morning experience.”²⁵² So not only does Price think that Jesus material in the gospels cannot be used as an historical Jesus database because it clearly serves the purposes of the communities creating and preserving it, not only does he think that the Jesus of the gospels is a tapestry of Hebrew Bible rewrites, but he thinks that the story in itself is merely a local version and adaptation of a wider myth or cycle of myths.

248 Ibid., p.32.

249 Ibid., p.33.

250 See, *ibid.*, pp.36-43 for the general argument and pp.59-261 for the great detail.

251 Ibid., p.44.

252 Ibid., p.46.

Just his point about the use of the Hebrew texts Price thinks “is already enough to vitiate the use of gospel materials to reconstruct a life of Jesus”²⁵³ even if we leave the other two points to one side. Jesus as a reconstructable individual becomes an impossibility. He fades into a man made of story, a fiction. For “If you can explain (Jesus) from systematic Old Testament borrowing, it is superfluous to look for anything else.”²⁵⁴ Consider that “a basically historical figure will... be tied into the history of his times by well-documented events,” writes Price. “Augustus Caesar and Cyrus of Persia would be good examples. Jesus Christ would not be. Consider the fact that at every point where the gospel story appears to obtrude upon contemporary history, there are serious difficulties in taking the narratives as historical.”²⁵⁵ Matthew’s birth narrative, clearly a fiction from beginning to end, is easy pickings for Price here. Yet if one part of the gospels can be shown up as fiction then where do we stop? Why not the rest? Why not whole and entire as Crossan now seems to endorse using the term “parable”?²⁵⁶ If it clearly did not bother gospel writing communities to produce such obvious fictions then do we need to reconfigure our sensor arrays as they do in Star Trek to look for something we had never imagined to find before? “It is a chain of very weak links that binds Jesus to the circumstances of the first century,” concludes Price.²⁵⁷

There is much more to Price’s argument for “Jesus agnosticism” or “Jesus mythicism” than this. Indeed, Price seems ready to counter most arguments that want to fix Jesus to a definite historical point or life. He makes us question what we think we know and forces us to do the hard work of demonstrating it. In so doing, he reveals that we certainly know less than we think we do. As just one final example, he writes:

253 Ibid.

254 Ibid.

255 Ibid., p.48.

256 In *The Power of Parable*.

257 Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, p.49.

"there are persistent alternative traditions as to when Jesus lived and died. Irenaeus thought Jesus was martyred under Claudius Caesar. The Talmud makes Jesus the disciple of Rabbi Jeschua ben Perechiah and has him crucified in 83 BCE, when Alexander Jannaeus crucified so many Pharisees. The Toledoth Jeschu incorporated these long-lived traditions. Epiphanius reports them, too. The Gospel of Peter assigns Jesus' condemnation to Herod Antipas, and (as Loisy suggested) so did one of Luke's Passion sources. If Pilate had really turned the case over to Antipas, and the latter set Jesus free, why on earth does Jesus go back to Pilate? Only because Luke wants to use as much as he can of both an "L" story (i.e. from a hypothetical "Lukan source," material private to "Luke") in which Antipas condemned Jesus, and Mark, in which it was Pilate who did the deed. How is it that such radically different estimates of Jesus' dates grew up side by side if there was a real event at the heart of it?"²⁵⁸

Price concludes that "the varying dates are the residue of various attempts to anchor an originally mythic or legendary Jesus in more or less recent history."²⁵⁹ For Price, it is like those who try to say when the mighty deeds of Heracles occurred or when Osiris was King of Egypt. Jesus becomes story and a story can be anywhere but it can also be any when. And if it can be any when then "All this implies it is utterly pointless even to ask whether there was sufficient time for legends to grow up around Jesus. Sufficient time from when?"²⁶⁰ In all this argumentation Price has, at the very least, put any historical information for or about the historical Jesus in doubt. Jesus is drowned in the stories and fictions that now constitute his existence, he is transfigured from flesh and blood

²⁵⁸ Ibid., pp.49-50.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p.50.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

into narrative and words. And “if we are that short on historical content, it begins to look as if there never was any,” says Price.²⁶¹ What do we think is probable now?

The Fictional Jesus

It is not an optimistic view of Jesus as history that results from the projects of Burton Mack and Robert Price. Indeed, it is much less so than those of David Friedrich Strauss and John Dominic Crossan I discussed before. The latter pairing wanted (and in Crossan’s case still want) to negotiate the choppy waters of contemporary intellectual life by finding ways to make a Jesus of history tenable for right now, whenever that was or is. They want(ed) to preserve the believability and meaningfulness of the text and if this was at the expense of a thoroughgoing historicity then so be it. With Mack and Price this is not so much in evidence. For them, there are bigger fish to fry than preserving the documents of some ancient religion as matters of historical record. They seek to understand better something about human activity rather than the relations between human beings and the ineffable as brokered by an historical son of god. For Mack, already, it is the storymaking and community building that counts more than the characters the stories are about and no historical figure could explain them alone anyway. With Price, in the beginning there was the story. There was nothing about Jesus that was not story. Jesus the story dwells among us. The Christian good news is that God sent his son into the world and *he* dwelt among us. The scholarly good news is that this is a meaningful story, a fiction, and why such fiction has been made and has had such an effect on those who have heard it is the interesting thing about it. For such scholars this is a story about stories, such scholars as Strauss, Crossan, Mack and Price.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p.51.

John Dominic Crossan, on his book tour promoting *The Power of Parable* and on book tours since, has had a cheeky retort for those who have a problem with fiction being used to communicate truth. It runs along the lines of “If you have a problem with story, take it up with Jesus!” For Crossan, of course, as we saw, Jesus is not only one who communicates truth via fiction but he is for Crossan “The Parable of God” or, as I rephrase it, The Fiction of God. We have seen in even my brief survey here how other pictures of Jesus emerge from historical research, non-canonical pictures based on putative historical records either repurposed into fictional narratives or excluded altogether from official and orthodox Christian belief. We have seen how the crucial events on which historic Christian faith has grounded itself are implausible history but yet meaningful story. And perhaps written to be the latter with some deliberation. Price’s suggestion, made honestly after as much historical research as any apologist might do in support of an orthodox historical view, that all the stories and repurposings of old stories into stories about Jesus eventually buries Jesus in fiction, resurrecting him as a simple storied individual, a fictional man, seems perilously close to the truth. Indeed, it might only be our cultural inheritance, our cherished beliefs or our need for a Galilean figure in the past, that stops us from simply admitting that “Jesus the Story” isn’t the more probabilistic answer to the Quest for the Historical Jesus.

In fact, that Quest began with a recognition that the gospels couldn’t literally be true and that myths, stories, were in evidence. Through the activities of waves of critical scholars, many Christian believers although some decidedly were not, the gospels slowly shed their protected status as documents guaranteed literally true by God. In that process we discovered that Mark came first and Matthew and Luke expanded upon it in their own way, implicitly disagreeing with his picture in the detail. We learned that John

was, if anything, simply a rewrite of this for his own purposes in which he didn't mind changing the history at all. We discovered Q as another document behind Matthew and Luke but one that, when looked at by itself, is hardly support for the picture that Mark instigated with his narrative presentation of Jesus. (Q, if it existed, is apparently not a narrative at all but a collection of sayings.) We were fortunate that the desert offered up to us the Gospel of Thomas (yet another sayings gospel without even a hint of narrative), a gospel which gave us a different set of ideas about Jesus and sent scholars off in new directions that are, to this day, as yet not fully explored. Pretty much all of this discovery was opposed tooth and nail along the way by "orthodox scholars" who saw their cherished beliefs and holy documents being disproved and relegated to the annals of mistaken ideas along the way. It seems that the fictions of belief were much more important to them than anything else as, for many, they remain to this day.

And yet it must be the case that a fictional Jesus, that case being the more probable one, has to mean something in itself. If Jesus was a fiction then that is not the end of the inquiry. It is not the end because then we must ask why the Jesus Myth, Jesus as Parable, "Jesus, The Fiction of God," has had such an effect on our world for 2,000 years. We find that with a story, with a fiction that explains things for us, it can go places that a person never could. Albert Schweitzer once said that "The glorified body of Jesus is to be found in his sayings"²⁶² and it may be the case that the stories about Jesus can live on much longer, and more powerfully, than any man ever could. Jesus is, in a sense, very fictionally alive right now in the hearts and minds of many (for better or worse) and in any number of likely and unlikely configurations, ones that pretend to be historical (like those of the gospels and many historical Jesus books) and ones that never could have been historical or ever will be historical. Yet what matters now is not an historical game

²⁶² Albert Schweitzer, *Reverence for Life* (ET; Harper and Row, 1969), p.65.

about proof for there frankly is no way to prove *any* of our constructions historical. The past is over and done and none of us were in it when it comes to Jesus. What matters now is what any of these stories are for. For if Jesus must exist as fiction then it is time to critique the fictions, showing where they help or hinder human progress and human solidarity, rather than pretending that they are historical and guaranteed by a god. That last fiction is one fiction that we can well do without.

Postscript on "Human Meaning-Making"

The history of Jesus scholarship and gospel creation that I am recounting tells the tale of the Gospel... in multiple gospels. Christianity, in the immediate post-Jesus generations (assuming there was such a Jesus), was a set of beliefs in formation, a belief that found diversity of expression and understanding as it spread from Jews to pagans, from Palestine to the wider Roman empire and even beyond. There was, at first and for several decades, no "official" Christianity and no one was going from place to place stamping out untruth or doctrinal error and passing on a list of official things that could be believed and shared that applied to everyone as some sort of authorised official spokesman. There was a marketplace of ideas (even Christian ideas as the split between East and West should show) and each Jesus community had its own context and chose its own beliefs and emphases. When gospels came to be written they weren't all the same thing. Some were collections of sayings and sometimes deeds, others told a narrative of sorts. But a narrative is a story and these stories used myth, parable and fiction to tell theirs. No one "got the story right". *They all got the story meaningfully wrong.* The meaning was what mattered for the message was paramount. So in one previous book I

wrote, from which this text is now taken, I go from the four canonical gospels as mixtures of myth and parable, literary works first and foremost, to two early gospels that weren't narrative at all (the gospels of Q and Thomas). And neither did they care much, it seems, about death or resurrection either (for they are referenced in neither). Then I look explicitly at this death and resurrection to ask what we have been presented with and what lies behind it since, it seems, a gauze of fiction has been laid across historical events, assuming even those events were themselves historical. Finally, I ask about the making of the whole Christian myth from the putative death of Jesus onwards in the remaining decades of the first century CE. This is not a Gospel anyone would tell and no one person is at its heart. It is a Gospel of no one.

The Gospel we have in the New Testament, told in four versions, is a historical gospel of a dying Jesus who rises again, a martyr who suffers in obedience to his God. It is, I become more convinced the more I research it, a fiction. Four fictions. Of course, if there was a Jesus he did die and we may choose to take the view that he was very much crucified by the Romans, regarding this as a bare, uncontextualised fact of history in need of historical explanation. But what it means and what happened next *is* a fictional construct. This, I must maintain most strongly, does not invalidate it. Indeed, in a way, it is actually all the validation it needs. It is a story about Jesus and his significance within a much greater story about the Jewish god. But it is, therefore, also an interpretation, just one interpretation and not a necessary interpretation nor an interpretation which is *the* interpretation. It is an interpretation which holds meaning and significance for those who cherish it and who have cherished it and who argue that it should mean something to others too. But it is an interpretation, a story, a fiction. I come to believe that what is now the historic Gospel is a martyr's fiction for martyred Roman Christians. That is its

historical context. What is behind it... who can say? As fiction, it now lives a life of its own, cut free of its historical moorings. Claimed historical authorities should be disregarded. We would do well here to remember the words of New Testament scholar, Helmut Koester:

*"The term 'canonical' loses its normative relevance when the New Testament books themselves emerge as a deliberate collection of writings representing various divergent convictions which are not easily reconciled with each other. The criterion 'apostolic' is useless when Christian movements that were later condemned as heretical can claim genuine apostolic origin. It is certainly untenable that the orthodox church and only this orthodox church was the direct offspring of the teachings, doctrines and institutions of the apostles' times and that only this church was able to preserve the apostolic heritage uncontaminated by foreign influences."*²⁶³

So we may consider that the historically fixated have outwitted themselves playing a game called "knowledge of history". This knowledge is, for them, analogous to fitting things into comfortable locations whilst preserving the notion that we have found what we have, instead, made. It is mere human arrogance that calls this prudence "knowledge" as if we have thereby described the nature of reality. It seems to me that most historical Jesus and New Testament scholars (who have a majority membership made up of Christian believers which will always rig the "consensus" vote) are happy with anything that fits within prescribed synoptic and Jewish parameters when it comes to Jesus. This isn't knowledge, it is scholarship which encourages feeling comfortable and a not getting too close to the edge for fear of looking down when the old certainties we

²⁶³ Helmut Koester in "GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity" in James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1971), p.115.

felt grounded in have been removed. It is, by analogy to the drawing game "join the dots," a situation where we not only join the dots as we like but we decide where the dots are too. It is faith, but a form of bad faith. It is faith which forgets that faith is not knowing at all. It is faith which forgets that believing is not knowing at all. It is faith posing as knowledge, faith *creative of* knowledge.

When you hear the parables of Jesus do you worry if they are true or not? If there was no Good Samaritan and if no one was robbed between Jerusalem and Jericho does that make Jesus a liar and a deceiver? What if, in another story of Jesus, there was no actual feast to which the host invited all who would come, both good and bad alike? Have we been tricked in that case? It is my concerted and abiding belief in writing this book that we haven't been tricked and we haven't been lied to in that case. But we have been opened up to the power and possibility of story: we have been offered a vision. If any of us today believe in a Jew called Jesus who died and rose again then we are ourselves testament to how a story can get hold of us and inspire us with its meaning.

But what, you might say, if the story turns out not to be true? Some would say that ruins everything. Paul in the New Testament seems to be such a person. But I'm not so sure. If there was no Good Samaritan, if no one was attacked, does Jesus thereby mean that, actually, we shouldn't judge people by the compassion they show for others and that nationality or outward perception is actually all that matters in the end? If there was no host who held a big feast who, when his invited guests made excuses, then invited any who would come, does this mean that God does not welcome all who respond to his call? Of course not. The story is true and its meaning is active and powerfully present regardless of if it happened or not. *Regardless*. So as with parables *of* Jesus why not with

fictions *about* Jesus? In the end, isn't what they mean more important? Isn't what it means the point of telling a story at all?

In thinking about the book this chapter was originally in after I had written the first draft a thought occurred to me. It was that some may think, those for whom an historical Jesus is not evident or those who wish to remove the historical comfort of Jesus from others, that removing Jesus from history is enough to destroy faith in what they see as the fable that has been built around him. But, in that case, I wonder if they have understood what I have said in this book or, more pertinently, if they have been living with their eyes open. Pre-eminent biblical scholars and theologians of the 20th century who influenced many other people, those such as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, happily got along with their stories of Jesus, and their theological careers, even though they had reduced the stories to the bare historical minimum. John Dominic Crossan, who is mentioned extensively in this book, has come to think of the centre of the Gospel as "parable" and "fiction" yet he still thinks there was an historical Jesus and teaches the reality of God, albeit often in more poetic or literary terms. I still see him being booked by congregations of believers to teach them and doing book tours for his latest literature which still seems to sell well.

If we think about this more closely it gets worse for those who see Jesus as an unhistorical fiction. For, look, what has this all been about? If I recall my chapter here concerning the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, I argued that no one knew what happened to Jesus and there was no empty tomb. If I am right, and that makes most sense to me, it hasn't stopped people believing in Jesus in their millions in the 2,000 years between then and now, most of whom never even had a chance to witness this

putative empty tomb or put their fingers in the crucifixion wounds as doubting Thomas did. These people did not need historical proof. They only needed the myth. As John tells us, then, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (Jn 20:29)

So taking the history away does not take Jesus away. Indeed, if Jesus is, was and only ever will be story, which is what the Greek "mythos" means, then the history of Christianity as a religious belief is still there without any historical Jesus to explain it... and it will be something that never even needed one. At that point, paradoxically, it becomes better for those who take offence at Christianity if Jesus *had* existed for then at least we could imagine he might be dead! But how, if not, do you kill a story and tame a belief that may have illegitimately historicized itself as guerilla fiction in our minds? How do you defeat the myth of Jesus incarnate when there is no corpse to produce and no historical argument to wield which has any power against a fiction that animates someone's reason to be and explains why they are here? Jesus as fiction ends up being more insidious and more immortal than an historical Jesus could ever have been. And that I would call ironic.

"The instant you speak about a thing, you miss the mark." Zen Proverb

"We have art in order not to die of the truth." Friedrich Nietzsche

"When all is said and done we look for the historical Jesus with our imaginations and there too is where we find him if we find him at all." Dale Allison

"In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa." Hayden White

"Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth." Albert Camus

"Is there any other way to live and any other way to know reality than in parables? There is the possibility that "in reality" means no more and no less than "in parables", that reality is parabolic." John Dominic Crossan

"In a real sense Jesus is never allowed just to be Jesus, he cannot just be Yeshua from Nazareth, anonymous Galilean, anymore. Claims to the contrary swirl all around us and no one entering into the Quest is unaware of them. The problem is not, as Schweitzer said, that he comes to us "as one unknown". The problem is very much the opposite. He comes to us as one only too well known. Would that we could go back and know him before he had become known at all. For now we know too much and yet nothing at all." This Author

8. Textual Jesus

"Reality is language." - John Dominic Crossan

Derrida, The Kabbalah and "No Outside-Text"

In my previous chapters of this book (and in yet others still to come), I have put forward the thesis that Jesus is fiction because we understand all things fictionally. I have also put forward the view that the gospels are fictional accounts of Jesus that aim to tell meaningful stories. However, in thinking about the (historical) character Jesus, it became apparent to me that Jesus is, surprise surprise, a character in texts and that texts are integral to a specifically Jewish context such as that from which Jesus springs. Indeed, having done a little research, it became very clear to me that texts, speech, language and literature are integral to an understanding of Judaism as it has historically come to be. This extends from the very first texts the historical Hebrews write, through the formation of a biblical canon, Jewish comment upon such texts and the production of further texts about these texts, and then on into medieval and more modern speculations regarding texts... and so on to the present day.²⁶⁴ Not only is it the case that Judaism came to be a textual, linguistically-fascinated religion, but Jesus the Jew became implicated in this context in early Christian reflection upon his character. What I intend to do in this essay, then, is review historical Jewish attitudes towards, and uses of, text and language, something which takes philosophical, theological and theosophical turns, before ending my tour by implicating interpretation of Jesus in the same agenda.

²⁶⁴ Evidence for this point of view can be found in the essays under the heading "Jewish Interpretation of the Bible" and "The Bible in Jewish Life and Thought" accompanying the excellent *The Jewish Study Bible*, (eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler: OUP, 2004), pp. 1827-2020.

I was sent off down this line of research by the quite accidental reading of an essay by Sanford Drob entitled “Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah”.²⁶⁵ This is all to the credit of Drob whose amenable writing style found me reading the 22 pages of his essay quite easily and making numerous notes on the text. I had had a somewhat distant interest in Derrida from afar before this point, a nodding acquaintance, and Kabbalah was but a word for some kind of mystic strangeness to me. However, having read Drob’s paper, I began several weeks of intensive research and growing interest, more especially in the Kabbalah, which have led to this essay and which opened up to me the notion of Judaism as a textual, linguistic religion as well as exposing me to many different forms of Jewish use of text as a metaphor and of language as something to be played with and interpreted for philosophical and religious ends. In this it becomes obvious, having only a very rudimentary appreciation of the work of Derrida, as to why one would link the Algerian-born Jew with the Kabbalah at all and Drob does so via previous commentary on this question in the work of three of the primary recent scholars of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, Elliot Wolfson and Moshe Idel.

Drob’s paper begins with an introduction which shows Derrida’s relation to Judaism to be veiled at best but certainly present. The French philosopher, who claimed to be an atheist and did not flaunt his Jewish heritage,²⁶⁶ preferring subtlety and allusion, was perhaps popularly known during his life for the linguistic notions of “différance” and “deconstruction” and for being entangled within “poststructuralism”, whatever one takes that to be about.²⁶⁷ Indeed, what Derrida “was about”, as with the Kabbalah, is a

265 As I am writing this book this 2006 essay by Sanford Drob, a prelude to his fuller work, *Kabbalah and Postmodernism: A Dialogue* (Studies in Judaism: Peter Lang, 2009) is still downloadable at <http://www.newkabbalah.com/JDK.pdf>.

266 Drob notes, on p.2 of “Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah,” that Helene Cixous referred to Derrida as a “marrano,” a secret Jew.

267 The Derrida bibliography is quite large but seminal and necessary works for my topic here are his *Writing and Difference*, (trans., Alan Bass: University of Chicago Press, 1978) and *Of Grammatology* (trans., G.C. Spivak: Johns Hopkins Press, 1974).

question that it is not easy to answer and certainly not without a considerable amount of research. However, somewhere we can start, for we must start somewhere, is with Derrida's statement that "There is nothing outside the text" or, as others suggest it be better translated, "There is no outside-text".²⁶⁸ This immediately makes one prick up one's ears in its textual conception of things. Before this statement, and in a book published in the same year, Derrida had written that "In the beginning is hermeneutics" and Drob also quotes him as saying that "Being is grammar".²⁶⁹ "Différance", Derrida writes, is "the disappearance of any originary presence, is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is truth. Nonpresence is presence."²⁷⁰ Clearly here we have a man thinking philosophically about language and being. Derrida will also write in his books about "the alienation from presence which writing necessarily brings with it"²⁷¹ and books called *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology* suggest a similar interest. In the former tome Derrida had written that "everything belongs to the book before being and in order to come into the world."²⁷² All very cryptic (as his critics would constantly accuse him of being) but definitely textually concerned.

So far I have only repeated rumours and snippets of rumours about Jacques Derrida and have not said so much as a line about the Kabbalah... and this is very much how it was for me as I got into researching this chapter. This is almost entirely because when I began reading Drob's paper I had no idea what it was or what it was concerned with. However, this essay does conclude with an accounting of the coincidences between the Kabbalistic belief system and Drob's cooperative and harmonious reading of Derrida together with it and the list contains numerous items which peaked my interest further. I want to list

²⁶⁸ Fatefully inscribed in *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

²⁶⁹ *Writing and Difference*, pp. 76.

²⁷⁰ Quoted by Drob, "Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah," p. 15.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁷² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 77.

the vast majority of them now as an orientation to the kinds of ideas which lay before us in this essay so that we may at least set out on our journey with something to think about.²⁷³

1. Reality is a text and God himself has his origin and being in the book.
2. Being is “grammar” and there is a breakdown of the distinctions between words and things.
3. Interpretations rather than facts are primordial.
4. Hidden within the apparently plain meaning of a linguistic event are innumerable other, as yet unknown, possibilities that can transform both the text and its meaning.
5. There is an exquisite tension between hermeneutics as a vehicle for arriving at an original truth and hermeneutics as a creative, playful and indeterminate endeavour.
6. Language has a power that pre-exists, goes beyond and conditions the speaking subject.
7. The “name” produces powerful effects over which the speaker has no command, but it refers to nothing, an “abyss”. There is no transcendental signified; there is no “presence” behind the name, only an abyss, a “creative absence”.
8. An “original space” provides the arena out of which all things, including God, language and being, are determined.
9. Language is the vehicle of creation and revelation while at the same time producing alienation and exile.
10. Experience, in particular Jewish experience, is one of division, alienation and exile.
11. God’s eclipse, separation, contraction and concealment is necessary for human speech and creativity and this separation/concealment is accomplished through the letters of writing and speech.

²⁷³ Drob, “Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah,” pp. 20-22.

12. Such concealment is the origin of revelation and truth.
13. Polar oppositions do not exclude but rather contain and are in some sense dependent upon one another.
14. An openness to an indeterminate messianic future characterized by an as yet unborn and unknown justice.
15. A convergence between atheism on the one hand and faith, prayer and mysticism on the other.

One of the scholars Drob referenced in his paper was Moshe Idel, one of the world's foremost authorities on Jewish mysticism in general and the Kabbalah (and the Kabbalists) in particular. One book of Idel's especially, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*,²⁷⁴ caught my eye with its chapter headings that spoke of "The World-Absorbing Text", "The God-Absorbing Text" and "Text and Interpretation Infinities in Kabbalah". This was definitely something that, as a reader, I was interested in, always having been a bookish, hermeneutically-interested sort of person. And so I dived in.

Like Derrida, the Kabbalah (which has a basic meaning of "tradition") and the Kabbalists are often accused of esotericism and arcanization (in both cases probably correctly). Yet, as Idel makes clear in the introduction to *Absorbing Perfections*, "Their recurrent claim is that their esotericism, and thus their arcanization, pertains to the very nature of the original texts beginning with the Bible itself. It is, according to them, not merely one dimension of the canonical texts but rather the decisive core of a text's religious mentality that determines their esoteric interpretations."²⁷⁵ The standard narrative for the emergence of the Kabbalists in the medieval and middle ages in southern France, in

²⁷⁴ Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 2002).

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

Catalonia and later in northern Italy is that of Gershom Scholem and his *Origins of the Kabbalah*.²⁷⁶ There Scholem refers to the philosophical state of Europe in the Middle Ages, to specifically Jewish views on creation and on “Merkabah mysticism” (that kind of mysticism which revolved around Ezekiel’s chariot visions in the Hebrew Bible), to the Hekhalot literature²⁷⁷ which, sometimes in fragmentary manner, documents this kind of mysticism, to the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation)²⁷⁸ which some unknown Jew wrote between the 2nd and 9th centuries of the Common Era and which depicts creation being formed from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet together with 10 “sephirot” (values or attributes of God) depicted as numbers, and to the *Sefer Ha Bahir* (Book of Illumination)²⁷⁹ which many take as the first significant genuinely Kabbalistic work. Scholem insists that it is key to understanding the Kabbalah that it is a mystical understanding of Judaism which revolves around the notion that things, and especially texts, have hidden meanings and are full of secrets. For some (for example, Alan Moore), this has magical connotations but, in general, it is more a preoccupation with hidden knowledge that is important and this is often linguistically or textually configured.²⁸⁰ Of course, in Jewish context the primary example of the book is the Torah, given to Moses by God himself on Mount Sinai,²⁸¹ and this carries the weight of the Kabbalistic esoteric speculation. In this it is noteworthy that much Kabbalistic literary production is itself commentary upon scripture in general and the Torah in particular. For example, if we take *Sefer Ha Zohar*, which most would agree is the primary literature produced by the medieval Kabbalists, it is largely a commentary on the Torah and a few other biblical

276 Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky; trans., Allan Arkush; JPS and Princeton University Press, 1987). German original from 1962.

277 See James R. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism* (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy: Brill, 2013).

278 Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (Revised Edition: Weiser Books, 1997).

279 Scholem devotes 150 pages to this book in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 49ff.

280 The editors of *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1978, note that “The kabbalists are... concerned with discovering the hidden nature of the divine reflected in the meaning of sacred texts. Along with this emphasis... (goes) esoteric hermeneutics or scriptural interpretation.”

281 See Exodus 19-24, 34.

texts.²⁸² Here we should note once more that Kabbalah has a basic meaning of “tradition” and take note of reminders given us by Idel and Scholem that the Kabbalists implicitly believed that the secret, hidden meanings they found in texts were inherent and original to the texts they studied and interpreted rather than their own creative speculations. They thought they were finding what had been put there, inherently part of the text, much as Derrida argued that it wasn’t him that did deconstruction to texts; rather, texts deconstruct themselves for language is deconstructive.

A principal subject of Kabbalistic speculation is the act of creation as we see in the proto-Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yetzirah*. There God “engraves” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1) the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and with them “He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2). In the final verse of its second chapter it is said that “He formed substance out of chaos and made nonexistence into existence. He carved great pillars from air that cannot be grasped. This is a sign (Aleph with them all, and all of them with Aleph). He foresees, transforms and makes all that is formed and all that is spoken: one Name. A sign for this thing: Twenty-two objects in a single body” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 2:6). The “twenty-two objects” are, of course, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the meaning to be gleaned is that in the creation of the Hebrew language there is the perfect tool for the creation of the entirety of creation itself. Aside from language there was no means to create anything but with it God can make everything that has been made. In Kabbalistic speculation this linguistic metaphor becomes also a literary one as the Torah, the primary book for any observant Jew, becomes almost equivalent with God and is regarded as encompassing the entirety of God, and so of his creation, within itself. God, indeed, is depicted as creating *according to it*. The Torah, as with the Hebrew

282 As demonstrated by Gershom Scholem’s abridged version of the text in *Zohar, Book of Splendor: Basic Readings From the Kabbalah* (Schocken Books, 1949) which covers the five books of Torah.

language, is imagined as existing *before* the beginning (if we can imagine a time before Genesis 1:1) and in coming to be in such a way as it contains the meanings we can see now by reading it but also encompassing infinite hidden meanings there, inherent and seemingly invisible, unless one finds the means to perceive them. The Torah was literally the book of creation and it sustains that creation to this day by dint of the fact that God's presence fills its text and all that has come to be is within its pages. As the *Sefer Yetzirah* records at its end of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, "And with them He made three Books, and with them He created His Universe, and He formed with them all that was ever formed, and all that ever will be formed." (*Sefer Yetzirah* 6:6) I now reproduce this text for your perusal of such thought.²⁸³

Sefer Yetzirah

ONE

(1) With 32 mystical paths of Wisdom engraved Yah, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the living God, King of the universe, El Shaddai, Merciful and Gracious, High and Exalted, Dwelling in eternity, Whose name is Holy, He is lofty and holy, And He created His universe with three books (Sepharim), with text (Sepher) with number (Sephar) and with communication (Sippur).

(2) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness And 22 Foundation Letters: Three Mothers, Seven Doubles And Twelve Elementals.

²⁸³ On *Sefer Yetzirah*, its versions, meaning and interpretation, see the version footnoted above by Kaplan as well as the comments of Scholem and Idel, *passim*, in *Origins of the Kabbalah* and *Absorbing Perfections*. The translation here is Kaplan's.

(3) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness in the number of ten fingers, five opposite five with a singular covenant precisely in the middle in the circumcision of the tongue and in the circumcision of the membrum.

(4) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven. Understand with Wisdom. Be wise with Understanding. Examine with them and probe from them Make [each] thing stand on its essence and make the Creator sit on His base.

(5) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their measure is ten which have no end, A depth of beginning, A depth of end, A depth of good, A depth of evil, A depth of above, A depth of below, A depth of east, A depth of west, A depth of north, A depth of south. The singular Master, God faithful King, dominates over them all from His holy dwelling until eternity of eternities.

(6) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their vision is like the "appearance of lightning," Their limit has no end. And His Word in them is "running and returning". They rush to His saying like a whirlwind And before His throne they prostrate themselves.

(7) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their end is embedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end, like a flame in a burning coal. For the Master is singular, He has no second And before One, what do you count?

(8) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Bridle your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking. And if your heart runs return to the place. It is therefore written, ""The Chayot running and returning." (Ezekiel 1:24) Regarding this a covenant was made.

(9) Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: One is the Breath of the Living God, Blessed and benedicted is the name of the Life of Worlds, The voice of breath and speech And this is the Holy Breath.

(10) Two: Breath from Breath. With it He engraved and carved 22 Foundation Letters Three Mothers, Seven Doubles and Twelve Elementals. And one Breath is from them.

(11) Three: Water from Breath. With it He engraved and carved [22 Letters from] chaos and void, mire and clay. He engraved them like a sort of garden, He carved them Like a sort of wall, He covered them like a sort of ceiling. (And He poured snow over them and it became dust as it is written "For to snow He said 'Become earth'" (Job 37:6).)

(12) Four: Fire from Water, With it He engraved and carved the Throne of Glory, Seraphim, Ophanim and holy Chayot and Ministering angels. From these three He founded His dwelling as it is written: "He makes His angels of breaths, His ministers of flaming fire" (Psalms 104:4).

(13) He chose three letters from among the Elementals (in the mystery of the three Mothers Aleph Mem Shin). And He set them in His great Name and with them, He sealed six extremities. Five: He sealed "above" and faced upward and sealed it with Yod Heh Vav. Six: He sealed "below" and faced downward and sealed it with Heh Yod Vav. Seven: He sealed "east" and faced straight ahead and sealed it with Vav Yod Heh. Eight: He sealed "west" and faced backward and sealed it with Vav Heh Yod. Nine: He sealed "south" and faced to the right and sealed it with Yod Vav Heh. Ten: He sealed "north" and

faced to the left and sealed it with Heh Vav Yod.

(14) These are the Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: The Breath of the Living God, Breath from Breath, Water from Breath, Fire from Water, Up, down, east, west, north, south.

TWO

(1) Twenty two Foundation Letters: Three Mothers, Seven Doubles and Twelve Elementals. The Three Mothers are Aleph Mem Shin, Their foundation is a pan of merit, a pan of liability, and the tongue of decree deciding between them. (Three Mothers, Aleph Mem Shin. Mem hums. Shin hisses and Aleph is the Breath of air deciding between them.)

(2) Twenty-two Foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them, And with them He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed.

(3) Twenty two Foundation Letters: He engraved them with voice, He carved them with breath, He set them in the mouth. In five places Aleph Chet Heh Ayin in the throat, Gimel Yod Kaph Koph in the palate, Dalet Tet Lamed Nun Tav in the tongue, Zayin Samekh Shin Resh Tzadi in the teeth, Bet Vav Mem Peh in the lips.

(4) Twenty-two Foundation Letters: He placed them in a circle like a wall with 231 Gates. The Circle oscillates back and forth. A sign for this is: There is nothing in good higher than Delight (Oneg) There is nothing evil lower than Plague (Nega).

(5) How? He permuted then, weighed them, and transformed them, Aleph with them all and all of them with Aleph, Bet with them all and all of them with Bet. They repeat in a cycle and exist in 231 Gates. It comes out that all that is formed and all that is spoken emanates from one Name.

(6) He formed substance out of chaos and made nonexistence into existence. He carved great pillars from air that cannot be grasped. This is a sign (Aleph with them all, and all of them with Aleph). He foresees, transforms and makes all that is formed and all that is spoken: one Name. A sign for this thing: Twenty-two objects in a single body.

THREE

(1) Three Mothers: Aleph Mem Shin. Their foundation is a pan of merit, a pan of liability and the tongue of decree deciding between them.

(2) Three Mothers: Aleph Mem Shin. A great mystical secret covered and sealed with six rings, And from them emanated air, water and fire. And from them are born Fathers, and from the Fathers, descendants.

(3) Three Mothers: Aleph Mem Shin. He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them. And with them He depicted Three Mothers AMSh in the Universe, Three Mothers AMSh in the Year, Three Mothers AMSh in the Soul, male and female.

(4) Three Mothers, AMSh, in the Universe are air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire Earth was created from water And air from Breath decides between them.

(5) Three Mothers AMSh in the Year are the hot and the cold and the temperate. The hot is created from fire The cold is created from water And the temperate, from Breath, decides between them.

(6) Three Mothers AMSh in the Soul, male and female, are the head, belly, and chest. The head is created from fire, The belly is created from water and the chest, from breath, decides between them.

(7) He made the letter Aleph king over Breath And He bound a crown to it And He combined them one with another And with them He formed Air in the Universe The temperate in the Year And the chest in the Soul: The male with AMSh And the female with AShM.

(8) He made Mem king over water And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Earth in the Universe Cold in the Year And the belly in the Soul: The male with MASH And the female with MShA.

(9) He made Shin king over fire And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Heaven in the Universe Hot in the Year And the head in the Soul: The male with ShAM And the female with ShMA.

FOUR

(1) Seven Doubles: Beth, Gimel, Dalet, Kaph, Peh, Resh, Tav. They direct themselves with two tongues Bet-Bhet, Gimel-Ghimel. Dalet-Dhalet, Kaph-Khaph, Peh-Pheh, Resh-Rhesh, Tav-Thav. A structure of soft and hard, strong and weak.

(2) Seven Doubles: BGD KPRT Their foundation is Wisdom, Wealth, Seed, Life, Dominance, Peace and Grace.

(3) Seven Doubles: BGD KPRT in speech and in transposition. The transpose of Wisdom is Folly The transpose of Wealth is Poverty The transpose of Seed is Desolation The transpose of Life is Death The transpose of Dominance is Subjugation The transpose of Peace is War The transpose of Grace is Ugliness.

(4) Seven Doubles: BGD KPRT Up and down East and west North and south And the Holy Palace precisely in the centre and it supports them all.

(5) Seven Doubles: BGD KPRT Seven and not six Seven and not eight Examine with them And probe with them Make each thing stand on its essence And make the Creator sit on His base.

(6) Seven Doubles: BGD KPRT of Foundation He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them. And with them He formed Seven planets in the Universe, Seven days in the Year, Seven gates in the Soul, male and

female.

(7) Seven planets in the Universe: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon.

Seven days in the Year: The seven days of the week. Seven gates in the Soul, male and female: Two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and the mouth.

(8) He made the letter Bet king over Wisdom And he bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed The Moon in the Universe Sunday in the Year The right eye in the Soul, male and female.

(9) He made the letter Gimel king over Wealth And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Mars in the Universe Monday in the Year The right ear in the Soul, male and female.

(10) He made the letter Dalet king over Seed And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed The sun in the Universe Tuesday in the Year The right nostril in the Soul, male and female.

(11) He made the letter Kaph king over Life And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Venus in the Universe Wednesday in the Year The left eye in the Soul, male and female.

(12) He made the letter Peh king over Dominance And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Mercury in the Universe Thursday in the Year The left ear in the Soul, male and female.

(13) He made the letter Resh king over Peace And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Saturn in the Universe Friday in the Year The left nostril In the Soul, male and female.

(14) He made the letter Tav king over Grace And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Jupiter in the Universe The Sabbath in the Year The mouth in the Soul, male and female.

(15) Seven Doubles: BGD KPRT With them were engraved Seven Universes, seven firmaments, seven lands, seven seas, seven rivers, seven deserts, seven days, seven weeks, seven years, seven sabbaticals, seven jubilees, and the Holy Palace. Therefore, He made sevens beloved under all the heavens.

(16) Two stones build 2 houses Three stones build 6 houses Four stones build 24 houses Five stones build 120 houses Six stones build 620 houses Seven stones build 5040 houses From here on go out and calculate that which the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear.

FIVE

(1) Twelve Elementals: Heh, Vav, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samekh, Ayin, Tzadeh, Qoph. Their foundation is speech, thought, motion, sight, hearing, action, coition, smell, sleep, anger, taste, laughter.

(2) Twelve Elementals HVZ ChTY LNS OTzQ Their foundation is the twelve diagonal

boundaries: The east upper boundary The east northern boundary The east lower boundary The south upper boundary The south eastern boundary The south lower boundary The west upper boundary The west southern boundary The west lower boundary The north upper boundary The north western boundary The north lower boundary They extend continually until eternity of eternities And it is they that are the boundaries of the Universe.

(3) Twelve Elementals HVZ ChTY LNS OTzQ Their foundation is that He engraved them, carved them, permuted them, weighed them, and transformed them. And with them He formed twelve constellations in the Universe twelve months in the Year and twelve directors in the Soul, male and female.

(4) Twelve constellations in the Universe: Aries (T'leh, the Ram) Taurus (Shor, the Bull) Gemini (Teumim, the Twins) Cancer (Sartan, the Crab) Leo (Ari, the Lion) Virgo (Betulah, the Virgin) Libra (Maznayim, the Scales) Scorpio (Akrav, the Scorpion) Sagittarius (Keshet, the Archer) Capricorn (Gedi, the Kid) Aquarius (Deli, the Water Drawer) Pisces (Dagin, the Fish).

(5) Twelve months in the year Nissan, Iyar, Sivan, Tamuz, Av, Elul, Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, Adar.

(6) Twelve directors in the soul male and female. The two hands, the two feet, the two kidneys, the gall bladder, the intestines, the liver, the korkeban, the kivah, the spleen.

(7) He made the letter Heh king over speech and He bound a crown to it And He

combined one with another And with them He formed Aries in the Universe Nissan in the Year And the right foot in the Soul, male and female.

He made the letter Vav king over thought And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Taurus in the Universe Iyar in the Year And the right kidney in the Soul, male and female.

He made the letter Zayin king over motion And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Gemini in the Universe Sivan in the Year And the left foot in the Soul, male and female.

(8) He made the letter Het king over sight And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Cancer in the Universe Tamuz in the Year And the right hand in the Soul, male and female.

He made the letter Tet king over hearing And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Leo in the Universe Av in the Year And the left kidney in the Soul, male and female.

He made the Letter Yod king over action And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Virgo in the Universe Elul in the Year And the left hand in the Soul, male and female.

(9) He made the letter Lamed king over coition And He bound a crown to it And He

combined one with another And with them He formed Libra in the Universe Tishrei in the Year And the gall bladder in the soul, male and female.

He made the letter Nun over over smell And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Scorpio in the Universe Cheshvan in the Year And the intestine in the Soul, male and female.

He made the letter Samekh king over sleep. And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Sagittarius in the Universe Kislev in the Year And the Kivah in the Soul, male and female.

(10) He made the letter Ayin king over anger And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Capricorn in the Universe Tevet in the Year And the liver in the Soul, male and female.

He made the letter Tzadeh king over taste And He bound a crown to it and He combined one with another And with them He formed Aquarius in the Universe Shevat in the Year And the Korkeban in the Soul, male and female.

He made the letter Qoph king over laughter And He bound a crown to it And He combined one with another And with them He formed Pisces in the Universe Adar in the Year And the spleen in the Soul, male and female.

He made them like a trough He arranged them like a wall He set them up like a battle.

SIX

(1) These are the Three Mothers AMSh. And from them emanated Three Fathers, and they are air, water, and fire, and from the Fathers, descendents. Three Fathers and their descendents. And seven planets and their hosts, And twelve diagonal boundaries A proof of this true witnesses in the Universe, Year, Soul and a rule of twelve and seven and three: He set them in the Teli, the Cycle, and the Heart.

(2) Three Mothers: AMSh Air, water, and fire. Fire is above, water is below, and air of Breath is the rule that decides between them. And a sign of this thing is that fire supports water. Mem hums, Shin hisses, and Aleph the breath of air that decides between them.

(3) The Teli in the Universe is like a king on his throne. The Cycle in the Year is like a king in the province. The Heart in the Soul is like a king in war.

(4) "Also God made one opposite the other" (Ecclesiastes 7:14). Good opposite evil, Evil opposite good. Good from good Evil from evil Good defines evil And evil defines good. Good is kept for the good ones And evil is kept for the evil ones.

(5) Three: Each one stands alone one acts as advocate one acts as accuser and one decides between them.

Seven: Three opposite three and one is the rule deciding between them. Twelve stand in war: Three love, three hate, three give life and three kill Three love: the heart and the

ears. Three hate: the liver, the gall, and the tongue. Three give life: the two nostrils and the spleen. Three kill: the two orifices and the mouth. And God faithful King rules over them all from His holy habitation until eternity of eternities. One on three three on seven seven on twelve. And all are bound, one to another.

(6) These are the twenty two letters with which engraved Ehyeh, Yah, YHWH Elohim, YHWH, YHWH Tzavaot, Elohim Tzavaot, El Shaddai, YHWH Adonai. And with them He made three Books, and with them He created His Universe, and He formed with them all that was ever formed, and all that ever will be formed.

(7) And when Abraham our father, may he rest in peace, looked, saw, understood, probed, engraved and carved, He was successful in creation, as it is written, "And the souls that they made in Haran" (Genesis 12:5). Immediately there was revealed to him the Master of all, may His name be blessed forever. He placed him in His bosom. and kissed him on his head, and He called him, "Abraham my beloved" (Isaiah 41:8). He made a covenant with him and with his children after him forever, as it is written, "And he believed in God, and He considered and He considered it righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of his hands - this is the covenant of the tongue, and between the ten toes of his feet - this is the covenant of circumcision, And He bound the 22 letters of the Torah to his tongue and He revealed to him His mystery He drew them in water, He flamed them with fire, He agitated them with Breath, He burned them with the seven planets He directed them with the twelve constellations.

According to most of the Jewish rabbinic sources, as Moshe Idel has it in *Absorbing Perfections*, pointing out that these are vital as building blocks for later, medieval Kabbalistic biblical interpretation, God is encountered within sacred texts (such as *Sefer Yetzirah* as just reproduced) rather than sacred spaces. This is only understandable for a people whose history is of being forcibly ejected from their lands and defeated in wars at home so that no official holy place of worship, such as the Jerusalem Temple, remains intact. In this context, God becomes constantly present within the literal signs of a portable book instead. It is Idel's view that "in the rabbinic documents the assumption is that there is no absolute freezing of the text's content, and the midrashic commentators were asked to capture the resonances and nuances dormant in the canonical texts."²⁸⁴ He continues regarding this practice that "The discovery, in fact the projection, of a secret meaning helps the ancient text not only to survive in new situations and to enhance its influence, but also to enrich the present."²⁸⁵ Idel argues that this is "amplifying the scope of the Torah to the status of a world-absorbing entity... portraying the Torah as (both) God-absorbing and man-absorbing."²⁸⁶

In order to give an overview of the Kabbalistic interpretation and veneration of the book, especially that book of books, the Torah, that would begin among many Jewish biblical interpreters in medieval times, Idel classifies them under three models:²⁸⁷

1). *"The theosophical-theurgical model... assumes that language reflects the inner structure of the divine realm, the sefirotic system of divine powers. At the same time, language was thought to influence this structure by means of theurgical activities that aim*

²⁸⁴ Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 3.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

to restore the harmony within the divine realm. Either in its cognitive-symbolic role or in its theurgical-operational function, language has been conceived by this type of Kabbalah as hypersemantic.”

2). *“The ecstatic approach... assumes that the Kabbalist can use language and the canonical texts in order to induce a mystical experience by manipulating elements of language, together with other components of the various mystical techniques.”*

3). *“The talismanic... conceives the divine text as one of the major means to attract supernal (divine or celestial) powers on the magician or the mystic, who becomes, in many cases, the portent of extraordinary forces that can be described as magical. In general, this approach can be called hyposemantic, which means that language is regarded as magically effective even when one ignores its semantic aspects.”*

What Idel finds common to all these models is “the view that language, at least as represented by the canonical texts, involves a strong type of “speech acts,” to use John Searle’s phrase, or, to use J. L. Austin’s category, the recitations of letters are performative utterances par excellence. However, the efficiency of the Kabbalistic approaches to language or text depends much more on their para-semantic qualities than on their semantic ones.”²⁸⁸ Here Idel offers a note of caution for “without an understanding of the overall speculative structures that informed the worldviews of the interpreters, it is hard to fathom some of the aspects of their hermeneutics.”²⁸⁹ Perhaps my readers saw that in trying to decipher some of the meanings inherent in the *Sefer*

288 Ibid., p. 15.

289 Ibid., p. 16.

Yetzirah, to which we will have cause to return shortly? Here we need to note a little background though:

*"The Bible was never met by the Jewish mystic for the first time when he became a mystic, but it already contributed in different manners to the religious life of the interpreter. The ongoing reading, reflection, and confrontation with the biblical text is a constant factor in the biography of Jewish mystics. It is always a renewed encounter that is the basic experience, since the Bible served as the first main topic of study in the early childhood of the future mystic.... Thus Jewish mysticism in most of its main forms is exegetical, as it consists in different searches for contact with God, when the Bible plays an important role as a repository of secret knowledge about the divine realm, as a source of models to be imitated or even techniques to reach the divine encounter, in addition to the more conspicuous engagement of many Jewish mystics in the more technical interpretive sense."*²⁹⁰

At this point we can take stock and appreciate that a Kabbalistic context for biblical interpretation is, perhaps, not our own. Kabbalistic interpretation is based on a number of presuppositions and one important presupposition especially is: "the theological assumption of an infinite divinity, designated in many Kabbalistic writings by the term *Ein Sof*, which was taken as defining Kabbalistic apophysis... (This) invited a vision of the Bible as containing an infinite number of distinct meanings".²⁹¹ Idel speculates on this and suggests that:

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 20.

*"To a certain extent the process of exegesis (in the Kabbalah) is a recirculation of divine power as embodied in Man, when striving to return to its source. From this point of view, one of the slogans of later Kabbalah shared by Hasidic writers and some of the so-called Mitnaggedim, which contends that God, the Torah, and Israel are one unit, reflects the integrative approach dominant in the relationship between author, text, and interpreter. In a way, this primordial and recurring triunity creates a situation reminiscent of the modern hermeneutical concept of belonging."*²⁹²

So how do we move from here to the thinking of pre-eminent Kabbalist, Moses Cordovero, that "the entire world is Torah"?²⁹³ Moshe Idel lays out for us what he understands as the four primary views on Torah from within pre-Kabbalistic rabbinics.²⁹⁴

1). Torah is conceived of as a pre-existent entity, which not only precedes the creation of the world but also serves as the paradigm of its creation.

2). Torah encompasses the whole range of supernal and mundane knowledge, serving thereby as the depository of the perfect and complete gnosis and as an indispensable bridge between man and the divine.

3). Torah study is a religious imperative, as it embodies the will of God, which has to be further explicated by the intense devotion to the perusal and analysis of the contents inherent in the biblical text. Even God was not exempted from this religious obligation, and His study of the Torah became a leitmotif in rabbinic thought.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

4). *Torah is regarded, in some rabbinic texts and in a plethora of Kabbalistic ones, as the “daughter” of God.*

It is from this sort of rabbinic view of the Torah that we can begin to approach the thought world of the *Sefer Yetzirah* which I quoted above. Here:

“An interesting claim in rabbinic literature, reiterated later by Kabbalists, is the view of God as looking into the pre-existent book of the Torah and creating the world. In this case, an extra-divine pattern is contemplated by God acting as a demiurge, which follows a certain pre-existing plan. The book seems to contain the universe, at least virtually, while God actualizes it just as an architect follows the preliminary plan. Preexistence, perhaps even primordially, already confers on the Torah the aura of a cosmic book, which is corroborated by the divine gazing at it in order to create the world.”²⁹⁵

Views like those we see in *Sefer Yetzirah* perched, as it is, between the Rabbis before it and the Kabbalists who will build on its thought “subsumed the creator to... pre-existing linguistic structures which, though authored by God, are nevertheless so definitive that even God is compelled to act in accordance with their order. The creating author, powerful as he may be, is therefore construed as obedient to the written articulation of his own will.”²⁹⁶ And again, “Here language in its consonant form, and mainly less semantic status, is considered the archetype of the world, having a transcendental existence, and also the stuff of the cosmos, thus expressing a much more immanentist approach.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 32. Idel also notes that God is sometimes referred as “He who spoke and the world came into being” at the same source.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

It should be pointed out again at this point that Kabbalistic thinking is built upon a Jewish mythology of its own. We saw in *Sefer Yetzirah*, for example, how at its end this creation mysticism wanted to align itself with Abraham and so plug into Jewish history and culture generally. The Kabbalistic notion of the Godhead as Ein Sof, The Infinite or The Endless as already mentioned, is one important part of this but no less so is the Kabbalistic myth in which the Infinite God, not necessarily thought of in personal terms as a “he,” has need to contract himself from infinite space in order to allow room for creation.²⁹⁸ The Kabbalistic and other Jewish mystical understandings of divine writing and books, preeminently in the Torah, go hand in hand with such mythology as we shall shortly see. However, in short, we should consider that “Jewish mystical sources... presuppose that the simplest and most efficient way to understand reality is to contemplate the book of God.”²⁹⁹ Here:

“God was not conceived as creating by writing but, according to a highly influential midrash, as contemplating the Torah as the paradigm of the world. Thus, the written manifestation of the Torah, and implicitly of the Hebrew language, becomes crucial for the transition from the chaotic to the cosmic state. The intermediary status of the written

298 See the references to the works of Scholem, Idel and Drob for more on this myth in particular with further bibliographic references. In Drob’s essay, for example, this “contraction” of God spoken of, which allows for creation, leads to alienation and can be exegeted by him in terms of Derridean thought on the same. A concise version of one such myth is as follows: Before the beginning, G*d was Endless Nothing Without End; Einsof, beyond all Being, Existence and Time. It was Nothing and It was All, It was nothing and It was Being. It withdrew itself by tzimtzum, self-negation and contraction, to create metaphysical space for creation. This created the realm of creation through the energy of the divine light, the Or Einsof which pervades and sustains all, and the power of its Word, the vehicle and substance of created things, a realm alienated from Einsof, Ha-Olamot. Into this creation came Adam Kadmon, the first created person, the Primordial Human, who embodied the ideas and values of G*d in creation which humans came to know as the Sephirot. Yet the Sephirot, emanated vessels which reveal the fundamental dimensions of meaning and value in G*d, in effect the content of G*d’s speech and divine writing, are unstable and deconstruct which leads to more alienation from Einsof and to a creation in a state of exile. This leads to oppositions, perplexities, absurdities and unfathomables such as we know intellectually, spiritually and morally in the created world today. The human task is to collect up and liberate the deconstructed shards of emanated divine light through a spiritual, intellectual and psychological process so that the ideas and values of the creation can be restored in a manner that enables them to structure and contain the primal energy of The Endless Nothing, Einsof, which completes both G*d and all created things. This is known as Tikkun Ha-Olam and is the restoration and emendation of the World and we are thus seen as fulfilling and completing the act of creation itself by this action. Human action, as such, completes the activity of G*d.

299 Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 44.

Torah now shares with the divine the status of preexistence, and it cooperates in the process of creation."³⁰⁰

Idel notes that:

*"A late midrash, 'Aseret ha-Dibberot, formulates the question as follows: "Before the creation of the world, skins for parchments were not in existence, that the Torah might be written on them, because the animals did not yet exist. So, on what was the Torah written? On the arm of the Holy One, blessed be He, by a black fire on [the surface of] a white fire."*³⁰¹

This midrashic suggestion becomes exegeted by Idel in the following way: "It is obvious that the quandary of the midrash is related to the written form of the Torah; only this version can raise the question of the substratum for the letters. Here the preexistence of the Torah is envisioned in purely written form, and the graphical component of the text is of paramount importance."³⁰² And so, "The Torah is viewed as an inscription on the divine body"³⁰³ and "Already in early Kabbalah and the writings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz there are a few statements suggesting the identity of the Torah with a body, presumably a divine one. A straightforward identity between Torah and God is found in the classic of Kabbalah, *the Zohar*, which declares, "The Torah is no other than the Holy One, blessed be He."³⁰⁴ Here the Torah that has absorbed the world has now also absorbed God. The divine book becomes of prime importance for to interpret it is to interpret God, Ein Sof,

300 Ibid., p. 46.

301 Ibid.

302 Ibid., p. 47.

303 Ibid., p. 49.

304 Ibid., p. 69.

himself.³⁰⁵

Idel draws his own conclusion from this when he notes that:

*"According to the mystical texts analyzed above, God is not only the author of the written Torah: He is also the substratum of the written letters. The intimacy between the text and the author is therefore maximal: the text can be read only against the background of its author. It is not only conveying a certain specific authorial intention but expressing the very being of the author, sometimes in an iconic manner."*³⁰⁶

This, says Idel in a further note, is "a God-absorbing kind of textuality."³⁰⁷ The nature of the Kabbalist's God here, infinite, endless, is very important both for their holy books and their ways of reading them for, as Idel says:

*"Many of the Kabbalists would opt for the existence of infinite specific and understandable interpretations... (whilst) some Kabbalists viewed the Bible as encompassing an infinity of meanings. The Bible therefore is regarded by Kabbalists as akin to, and in several texts identical with, aspects of the Godhead itself."*³⁰⁸

If your God is infinite then why would your interpretations of his holy words not be, especially if you basically identify one with the other? Here interpretation is not just literary but pretty much ontological, an insight into (God's Endless) Being itself. The

305 Elliot Wolfson has also noted this in his Kabbalah scholarship. For example, in his extremely compact and readable contribution to the article "The Bible in the Jewish Mystical Tradition" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, pp. 1976-1990, he writes: "This is the hermeneutical foundation for the kabbalistic understanding of Scripture: The scroll, rendered hyperliterally, constitutes the scriptural body of the divine" (p. 1980). Later he will speak of scripture's "textual embodiment" of God and draw the correct conclusion that this is indeed an incarnational notion (p. 1985f.).

306 Ibid., p. 75.

307 Ibid., p. 78.

308 Ibid., p. 83.

nature of Hebrew text is important here, too, since it conspires with such a desire to read this way as it was written without vowels. "Here," says Idel, "reading itself is fundamentally interpretive... The Torah scroll, written without vowels, is... pregnant with a variety of vocalizations, all of them possible without any change in the canonical form of the sacred text."³⁰⁹ In some places, such as Rabbi Bahya ben Asher's Commentary on the Pentateuch, it could be said that "The scroll of the Torah is [written] without vowels, in order to enable man to interpret it however he wishes."³¹⁰ And the Book, being an infinity, will not protest.

To go back to the beginning of this chapter, however, Idel would like to distinguish Kabbalistic exegetical infinities from Derridean indeterminacies. It is important we hear what Idel has to say about this in full:

"Despite the fact that these Kabbalists maintained the traditional order or morphe of the Torah, they still conceived its meaning as amorphous, allowing each and every interpreter an opportunity to display the range of his exegetical capacities. This initial amorphousness is not, however, identical to indeterminacy, a concept that would assume that the meaning of a given text cannot be decided in principle. A Kabbalist would say that all the meanings that are created by the different forms of vocalization are inherent in the text because they had been inserted, premeditatedly, by the Author, each of them in a rather transparent manner. It is not human feebleness to enchain language in a certain determined discourse that opens the text to many interpretations, but the infinite divine wisdom... that allows a powerful author to permit the existence of different vocalizations that coexist in the same

309 Ibid., p. 84.

310 Ibid., p. 86.

*consonantal'gestalt."*³¹¹

Yet it is now we need to come to the "why is all this important?" question. Idel suggests that "the concept of infinity of meaning transforms the Torah from a socially motivated document into a tool employed by mystics for the sake of their own self-perfection."³¹² He continues that it is in "an atemporal supernal reservoir that a Kabbalistic interpreter believes he will find his interpretations. Thus, Kabbalists operated with a radical trust in the text, rather than a basic mistrust in its author as the generator of the text, which characterizes modern deconstructive approaches."³¹³ And with that we are back with Derrida and with "There is no outside-text" for, even on Idel's carefully distinguished and described analysis of the Kabbalists and their rabbinic forbears, what we have seen is a textual conception of things, of creation and even of God himself. This has mandated reading these things as books and has made all interpretation. "Being is grammar," said the atheistic Derrida, and "everything belongs to the book before being and in order to come into the world." Perhaps now we understand a little more why Sanford Drob might link the controversial philosopher with Kabbalistic ideas and see value in those ideas themselves?

Rabbinic Texts

As Idel suggested, Kabbalistic interpretation of biblical texts was based on, and became possible because of, the earlier, rabbinic formulation of Judaism that came to be after 70 CE, and the fall of Jerusalem due to its destruction by Rome, and about 500 CE. It was because of the rabbinic attitude towards scripture and, especially, its formulation of

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 87.

³¹² Ibid., p. 91.

³¹³ Ibid., p. 104.

Torah (a slippery word which can mean just the traditional five books of Moses but sometimes more) as a matter of the written Torah and the oral Torah, that is, of both a text and its accompanying interpretations together, that Kabbalah became possible at all. But let us now step back into that rabbinic area more specifically and revert from more mystical uses of text to ones more practical and communal.

Steven D. Fraade, in his chapter "Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism" from the book *Jewish Concepts of Scripture*,³¹⁴ relates a story from later in the rabbinic era about the rabbis Shammai and Hillel, the two pre-eminent rabbis of the later first century CE. It goes as follows:

What was the impatience of Shammai the Elder? They said: A story [is told] about a certain man who stood before Shammai, saying to him, "My master, how many Torahs do you [plural] have?" [Shammai] said to him, "Two, one written and one oral." [The man] said to him, "With respect to the written one I believe you, but with respect to the oral one I do not believe you." [Shammai] rebuked him and angrily removed him. He came before Hillel, saying to him, "My master, how many Torahs were given?" [Hillel] said to him, "Two, one written and one oral." [The man] said to him, "With respect to the written one I believe you, but with respect to the oral one I do not believe you." [Hillel] said to him, "My son, have a seat." He wrote out for him the alphabet. [Pointing to the first letter,] he said to him, "What is this?" [The man] said to him, "It is an aleph." [Hillel] said to him, "This is not an aleph but a bet." [Pointing to the second letter,] he said to him, "What is this?" [The man] said, "It is a bet." "This is not a bet," said [Hillel], "but a gimmel." [Hillel] said to him, "How do you know

314 Benjamin D. Sommer, ed., *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York University Press, 2012). Steven D. Fraade, "Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism," pp. 31-46.

*that this is an aleph, and this is a bet, and this is a gimmel? Only because our earliest ancestors have passed it on to us that this is an aleph, and this is a bet, and this is a gimmel. Just as you have accepted [received] this [the alphabet] on faith, so too accept the other [the two Torahs] on faith.*³¹⁵

As Fraade notes, the point of this story is to praise Hillel's patience over Shammai's impatience yet it is instructive regarding rabbinic thinking. It infers that the two key figures at the beginning of the rabbinic period both accept a written and an oral Torah and it does this against the dissenting view of their questioner who we may imagine to speak for the public here. Second, Hillel argues these two Torahs, the written text and its oral interpretation, are like language and its oral interpretation that we are given which tells us how to use it. This is in distinction to using the written text to prove that oral interpretation should be equally revered. In other words, there's no "proof-texting" here. The argument here is that all systems of knowledge or communication rest on oral traditions that are passed on which explain how to use them. Having just a text that we expected to speak for itself would be as useless as wanting to speak for a text but not having one. It is both or neither. Thus, as Fraade makes plain himself, this story is more subversive still in that this questioner has failed to recognise that his acceptance of written Torah, a sacred text, is itself dependent on his reception by other means of oral tradition received by oral transmission; its simply not possible to receive texts without also receiving oral traditions about how to understand and make use of them.³¹⁶

Benjamin D. Sommer, the editor of *Jewish Concepts of Scripture*, expounds on this more in his chapter from the book which deals with "Concepts of Scriptural Language in

³¹⁵Ibid., pp.34-35.

³¹⁶ As Fraade puts this: "All systems of knowledge and communication rest on foundational postulates that cannot be proven but must be accepted ("on faith") in order for the system's foundations to be constructed," p. 35.

Midrash.”³¹⁷ Midrash was a type of textual interpretation or exegesis practiced by the rabbis in the first centuries of the Common Era and its importance can be divined in that Sommer opens his chapter by saying, “Virtually all Jewish conceptions of scripture since late antiquity grow up in the shadow of the rabbinic interpretations known as midrash.”³¹⁸ It is interesting here to note that Sommer ascribes to this type of interpretation of biblical texts four specific characteristics:

1). Sommer notes that, for the rabbis, “the Bible’s language is divine language.” What this means immediately is that it is regarded as “supercharged with meaning.” It is not just like other writing.

2). Sommer notes that midrashic interpretation views the Bible not as containing stories or even whole books but as containing numerous collections of two or three verses. This seems like an atomistic notion and it is not lost on this writer, at least, that the smaller the unit, the more seemingly easy it would be to manufacture a multiplicity of uses or connections for it.

3). For his third point Sommer notes that, for the midrashic interpreters, the Bible is a unity. This can be seen to bring together the common context of point 1, that this writing is united in being divine language, and the atomising tendencies inherent in point 2. The context of midrashic interpretation was, then, an infinitely complex unity with an infinity of possible relations in that all these small units of maybe only a verse or two could, potentially, be interpreted together with, or in the light of, other texts in completely different biblical books that, on the surface at least, don’t seem related at

³¹⁷ *Jewish Concepts of Scripture*, pp., 64-79.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

all. By such means, the midrashic interpreters leant to the biblical text a depth that is not immediately apparent in its surface connections.

4). The fourth and final characteristic Sommer notices in midrashic interpretation is its adducing of non-obvious textual connections that the third point motivates. This could be, for example, at word level, an idea that suggests another text or some textual peculiarity. It could also be one verse interpreted in the light of another verse which itself was clarified by a third verse known of but not even mentioned. Here one can conceive of the midrashic interpreters as looking for clues to a “hypertextual matrix” of meaning which would rely on a deep familiarity with the biblical texts as a whole.³¹⁹

It is easy to see, reading the chapters of Sommer and Fraade, how rabbinic notions of Torah as written and oral and their midrashic interpretational practices and presuppositions would be vital planks in enabling the later mystical uses of text and of its interpretation by the Kabbalists. In both cases a text held a sacred place yet not in a dry, protestant Christian “Sola Scriptura” (scripture alone) sense... but also with an oral, interpretational component that was felt equally valid and without need of textual support. We may say that in both Jewish contexts, but surely the latter more so than the former, the text was seen to take on the nature of an infinitely complex god which made it different, special, complex, infinite, deep. Whilst for the Kabbalists who wrote the *Zohar* God could be equated with Torah, for the rabbis it was more a case that even something that came in his language must take on his characteristics in some measure. What’s more, the persistently oral, interpretational component, which in rabbinic myth equally went back to Moses and Sinai just as the written text did, added a present liveliness to the text which became more than the ritual icon a written text could easily

³¹⁹ These four characteristics are spelled out in more detail on, *ibid.*, pp. 66-69.

be by itself. It was not, in these conceptions, that God once spoke; God speaks, present tense. There are always more meanings there to find.

An example of this is provided by the targum (translation) of the Hebrew Bible in Aramaic that was transmitted to us by the rabbis, specifically Targum Neofiti 1 and even more specifically the opening chapters of Genesis from that targum.³²⁰ You will, perhaps, be familiar with the opening of Genesis which details the creation of everything by God in poetic form and, seemingly, in two differing stories, one in which he creates in six days and rests on the seventh, thus creating the sabbath, and a second one directly after which concentrates on Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. In our traditional bibles which contain the Hebrew text “God” does these things. But not so in the Aramaic targum. Here, for example, is chapter 1, verse 1 from that source:

*“From the beginning with wisdom the Memra of the Lord created and perfected the heavens and the earth.”*³²¹

Here the power of creation is given to the “Memra” (word) of the Lord. It is this word which says “Let there be light!” and it is this word which creates all the other things too in nearly every case (either in a textual note or the text itself). What is instructive here is how the rabbinic scribe(s) who came up with this has interpreted the consonantal text before him. “From the beginning with wisdom” interprets what most would have as “In the beginning,” the first words of Genesis 1. But, remember, the Hebrew text was written without vowels. From the consonants alone “From the beginning” and “with wisdom” are equally valid by supplying different vowels for vocalization. This targum has

³²⁰ *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis* (The Aramaic Bible, Volume 1A; trans. Martin McNamara: The Liturgical Press, 1992). McNamara’s textual notes are important and valuable to readers of this book.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

chosen to understand *both* meanings as present and so as equally valid and so it has run them together as the meaning of the letters. It should not go unnoticed that this introduces the notion of God's wisdom explicitly into the text as well as that of his word as an active agent of creation. We have had reason to mention these things, if by other designations, already.

We come upon a similar phenomenon when we read chapter 3 of Genesis in the same source.³²² Here Adam and Eve, having discovered their nakedness after their inadvisable snack, hear "the Memra of the Lord God" (3:8) walking in the Garden. Clearly, here "the word of the Lord" is meant as a circumlocution for God. The desire of Jewish adherents not to mention God directly is, of course, a deferential gesture within that tradition and will become apophatic within the Kabbalah, something which expresses God as an impersonal infinity that cannot be captured within anthropomorphic language. Yet centuries before this God could be referred to as his own word as here in this targum.

Towards the end of chapter three the targum gets differently interpretational again when it speaks of the punishments for the snake in tempting Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Here is 3:15: "And it will come about that when her sons observe the Law and do the commandments they will aim at you and smite you on your head and kill you. But when they forsake the commandments of the Law you will aim and bite him on his heel and make him ill."³²³ Here "the Law and commandments" are mentioned even though we haven't even got to Exodus yet! This, of course, is reminiscent of the writer's context though in which such things are so important that they have been read back into the story of the first humans in the primeval Garden. Similarly, in 3:22 of this targum

³²² Ibid., pp.59-64.

³²³ Ibid., p.61.

Adam and Eve are turfed out of Eden since they have not obeyed “the precept of the Law and fulfilled its commandment”.³²⁴ In 3:24 the targum states that “Two thousand years before he created the world he had created the Law” and the chapter ends with “For the Law is a tree of life for everyone who toils in it and keeps the commandments: he lives and endures like the tree of life in the world to come. The Law is good for all who labor in it in this world like the fruit of the tree of life.”³²⁵ In this targum God can be his own personified word and the importance of Torah is such that it is read back into creation and even before it. Torah is life itself.

Jewish Biblical Texts

But let us step back again, this time to within biblical texts themselves.³²⁶ What should we make of a text like Psalm 119, a text which is both an acrostic, a text which writes 8 verses beginning with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in succession, and in which each verse is itself talking about the Torah? This seems to testify to the close linkage between Hebrew language and Hebrew law as an expression of God that we see in much later Jewish thought. What should we make of the books (actually one book) of Chronicles which rewrite earlier books of history within the Jewish biblical canon (such as Samuel or Kings) whilst the unaltered history remains there alongside it, a witness to a different interpretation of events? Is there the notion that God is present in history but that he is present at different times in different ways? Is this a God who doesn't just speak once but who speaks constantly and perhaps even differently? What should we make of the concept of prophecy that is powerfully present throughout much of the Jewish biblical tradition from ecstatic individuals who are claimed to speak with the

324 Ibid., p.63.

325 Ibid., p.64.

326 A useful overview here is that of Benjamin D. Sommer in *The Jewish Study Bible*, pp. 1829-1835.

voice of God to books which, at best, are argued to be written collections of such speech? Are we, once more, witnessing the notion that the Jewish God is a communicative God? What should we make of books like Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings which Jewish tradition calls “prophets” no less than it does the ecstatic individuals sometimes recorded within them and even though, to modern readers, they are narrative histories or even just meaningful stories? Is this the idea that God is revealed in the history of his activities and that this record is there for all to see and understand if the story is interpreted rightly?

If one does a word search for “word of the Lord” in the Hebrew Bible one gets more hits than one can process. He may, in the story of Elijah, be the God who was in the silence,³²⁷ but the testimony of the Hebrew scriptures is that God is far from uncommunicative. Indeed, one may say as an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the tradition of Judaism in general that all that is is an expression of the communication of this god. As a textual and interpretive tradition as a whole, God’s communicability is emphasized and ever present. He is in events, he is in stories of events, he is active in shaping and guiding his people due to a covenant relationship, he is active in speech and language and he is active in books and in the Book. And perhaps even as a book and its interpretations. Yet all of this, in biblical terms, is not to mention the creation in Genesis 1-3, the Torah-giving in Exodus, especially at such pivotal places in the narrative as Exodus 3, 24 and 34, the covenant as mentioned in Deuteronomy 6, the numerous messengers and angels evident throughout Genesis and other places, the activity with prophets, especially as revealed in prophetic cycles like the Elijah-Elisha cycle in from 1 Kings 17 - 2 Kings 13, parodies on the notion of prophets and prophecy such as that in the comic (and no doubt fictional) tale of Jonah, and the numerous mystical visions of the Hebrew bible such as those

327 1 Kings 19:12-13.

found at Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and throughout Daniel. In all of these places and many others not even mentioned the concept of the word of God or his communication, verbal or written, is mightily evident and a constant strand of Jewish thought and self-understanding. This God is bursting with communication and he provides much for the receiver to process besides hot coals (Isaiah 6).

The *Wisdom of Solomon* is not a book in the Hebrew canon but it was written before such a thing was finalised and it was done by a deeply pious Hellenistic Jew influenced by Stoic and Egyptian ideas writing in Greek to laud the wisdom of his God in the name of Solomon, the epitome of a practitioner of Jewish wisdom (yet by allusion only as Solomon's name is not directly mentioned).³²⁸ The book speaks of the divine feminine, Wisdom, in glowing terms, equating this "fashioner of all things" (Wis 7:22) to some very familiar ideas indeed:

There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, 23 beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle. 24 For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. 25 For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. 26 For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. 27 Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; 28 for God loves

³²⁸ The book's interesting history and its historical and literary contexts and contents are compactly summed up by Howard Clark Kee in his introduction to the book in the *Cambridge Annotated Study Apocrypha* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. xx-xxi.

nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. 29 She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, 30 for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail. 8:1 She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.
(Wis 7:22 - 8:1)

The language of “emanations” of God seems more suitable to Kabbalistic conversation perhaps 1300 or 1400 years after this book was written. Yet here it is, more than likely written before Jesus ever walked the earth. I have the idea in all this that “word of the Lord” or “Torah” or “Wisdom,” as here, are all Jewish circumlocutions for God just as prophets or books or their interpretations, all carriers of his word, wisdom and law, can do service as his servants. The notion of God I get from all these ways of speaking about him is of a being who is dynamic, communicative, complex, apophatic, rhizomatic. The God behind all these ways of expressing him is not one thing, not something that can be pinned down, domesticated, described or explained. This is a God, it seems to me, that the Jewish tradition describes as in need of constant interpretation because no one interpretation, or collection of interpretations, is up to the task of describing him. An end to the interpreting, a time when we can say the interpretations have made themselves adequate to the task of describing God and his words, will never be reached. No matter how much interpretation is done, you never get any closer to the goal. This God, like Aslan as a lion, is not tame or tamable. This is, then, truly Elijah’s God for he is a God of silence, of aporia, that speaks, silence that is in need of words that never fill the silence that is God. The presence of the text, the substance that produces absence, calls forth the need of the interpretation... and yet they still reveal and equal a lack no matter how many connections are made from text to text, no matter how many readings

are done. God and his text and his interpretation are infinite, endless; Ein Sof. Language is perhaps the best analogy here and we should credit the Jewish tradition with that insight, that metaphor for God, for there is, ironically, some deeply significant and inexpressible truth about it. This Jewish insight is that the divine reality is analogous to language and before it we can only sit silently and contemplate Sanford Drob's earlier suggestion that "Reality is a text and God himself has his origin and being in the book." The Kabbalists equated God with Torah; were they in the end far off?

But this is not a book about Jewish language, the Torah, Jewish biblical interpretation or ontological speculations about the nature of the Jewish God. This is a book about Jesus. The major authoritative literature about Jesus is the New Testament of the Christian bible and so it is to that I turn in order to steer the ship of this particular chapter in the direction of Jesus. In conceiving this chapter my aim was to ask myself how Jesus, a Jew, fits into such a textual and linguistic conception of God as Judaism seems to generate in many different directions. Many of the Christians who write about Jesus in the New Testament also seem to be ethnic if not certainly cultural Jews and so I thought it would be interesting to see how they triangulate the meaning (or interpretation) of Jesus using literary or linguistic categories. I want to do this by looking at how Jesus is presented in three gospels, those of John, Matthew and Thomas, as well as in the book of Revelation.

Jesus and Early Christian Texts

When we look at Jesus in John's gospel we don't have to look far to get a hit: "In the beginning was the Word" (1:1). Score! But this is not Jesus as word as we have so far encountered word in this chapter. For the meaning here we have to turn to the

Hellenistic concept of “logos” which incorporates ideas about “wisdom” or “reason” that we saw in *Wisdom of Solomon* attached to Lady Wisdom as the “fashioner of all things” (Wis 7:22).³²⁹ That was called an “emanation” of God. For his part, John describes Jesus the Word as “with God” and says that he “was God”. As Kabbalists will later say Torah and God are the same thing and one constitutes the other so John, several hundred years prior, will make the same equation of Jesus the Word too. John continues in ascribing the aspects of wisdom or reason to Jesus when he says that “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn 1:3-4). Here Jesus is a principle of creative reason, a pattern of sense, just as for others Torah will be and for yet others divine wisdom will be. The difference, of course, is that this Word “became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). But this incarnation of divine reason that John imagines Jesus to be creates a problem for there is already something present in Jewish life and culture which fulfills this role: the Torah. How does John deal with it?

The first thing to say is that it doesn’t stop him quoting it or alluding to it and he does this several times suggesting that he sees the Torah as an authoritative text (or at least recognises that others do). Yet John seems to know that he must broach this subject head on - and he does. Jesus is identified as a prophet (4:19) yet as more than this because he claims in John that the Hebrew scriptures, if we can talk of such a thing at that time, testify to him (5:39)! Again, in the same discourse, Jesus says that the accuser of his (Jewish) opponents is “Moses” (5:45-47) by which he means the five books of

329 See Daniel Boyarin’s essay, “Logos, A Jewish Word: John’s Prologue as Midrash” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (eds., Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 546-549, for the specifically Jewish twist on this which links *logos*, word, with *sophia*, wisdom, and *Memra*, word (in Aramaic). There Boyarin, speaking of Philo, a Hellenistic Jew contemporaneous with Jesus, writes: “Philo, writing in first-century CE Alexandria for an audience of Jews devoted to the Bible, uses the idea of the Logos as if it were a commonplace. His writings make apparent that at least for some pre-Christian Judaism, there was nothing strange about a doctrine of a manifestation of God, even as a “second God”; the Logos did not conflict with Philo’s idea of monotheism” (p. 546).

Moses, the Torah. At 6:14 Jesus is “the prophet who is to come into the world” and at 6:31-35 he is a better version of the heavenly manna by which God, in the Torah, fed Israel on its journey to the land of milk and honey (Ex 16:4). Later in the same chapter Jesus is found quoting scripture and saying it points to him once more (6:45) and Jesus, in the confession of Simon Peter, has “the words of eternal life” (6:68) which pious Jews would surely reserve for the Torah itself. Similarly, in 8:17-18, Jesus invokes the Torah as an authority when he claims that both he himself and God testify on his behalf, fulfilling the requirement of two witnesses (Deut 19:15), and yet he seems to subsume God’s word in Torah under the authority of his own word when he tells his disciples to “continue in *my* word” at 8:31-32 and tells his opponents they cannot continue in *his* word at 8:43. This “word” of Jesus saves from death at 8:51 which is close to the place, in 8:58, where Jesus says “Before Abraham was, I am” in which he seems to use the formulation “I am,” from Exodus 3:14, given there as God’s name for himself, of himself. Given that John’s Jesus will say at 10:30 that “The Father and I are one” this is not an unlikely conclusion.

We may say, then, that in John Jesus is not subject to the Torah because he has usurped it. He is the pre-existent Word, equal to, yet separate from, God himself. It is not he who testifies to the truth of Torah but the Torah which testifies to the truth of him and his words. In the course of debate with his opponents Jesus states that “the scripture cannot be annulled” (10:34-38) which testifies to a high opinion of the written word of God. Yet the gospel also argues that Jesus does signs which should testify on his behalf even as his opponents in the text claim that the Torah testifies to God. So, putting these two together, we have the notion that Jesus’ opponents cannot see the light (which in this gospel is Jesus, 8:12)³³⁰ and that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life” (14:6) that,

330 Note that Boyarin, *ibid.*, draws connection between “light” and “logos”.

for regular Jews, the Torah would be presumed to be. In the latter part of the gospel it is Jesus' commandments that should be kept (14:15, 21, 23-24) and it is Jesus' "word" that is cleansing (15:3). Yet Jesus claims to have given his followers God's word (17:14, 17) and John can still describe his crucifixion with scriptural allusions to Ps 69, Exodus 12, Ps 34 and Zechariah 12. Hebrew scripture has authority but only inasmuch as it points to Jesus.

When we come to Matthew the approach is different and can be summarised by the paradigmatic Mt 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." This paints Jesus as one not over and above Torah but as one who pushes it to its logical purpose and conclusion. Indeed, in the very next verse Matthew's Jesus is clear to point out that Torah is still paramount and very much in play and it will stay so "until heaven and earth pass away" (5:18). Therefore, obeying and keeping Torah is still important for Matthew's first readers and "whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19). Jesus' teaching, then, is probably intended to be seen as carrying out this role of "fulfilling Torah" and, indeed, many commentators suggest that in Matthew Jesus is presented as the giver of Torah or "a greater Moses".³³¹ Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount, where these texts are from, is given by Jesus from a mountainside even as Moses was at Sinai in Exodus with the reception of the original. This "sermon" contains the phrase "You have heard it said... but I say" of Jesus (5:21-48) as he "fulfills" (or perhaps "perfects" or "completes") Torah. Again in chapters 6 and 7 of Matthew, the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives teaching on righteousness, prayer, fasting, wealth, judging and asking God which is all

³³¹ So Aaron M. Gale in his introduction to Matthew in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, pp. 1-2.

very compatible with Jewish thought. The force of 5:17 is once more brought out as an interpretive key to Jesus in Matthew and Jesus is presented as teaching “the Law and the Prophets” (7:12).

It will perhaps be not that surprising, then, that Matthew is by far the biggest gospel quoter of Hebrew scripture. It is clear he wrote for a community who still valued the Hebrew scriptures as texts that were important for guiding life and piety and who laid store by what they said. Yet not only did he quote them, he used their stories as guides for presenting Jesus such as in his birth narrative where Jesus, like Israel before him, goes to Egypt and comes back or where Jesus “comes down from the mountain” as Moses did in Exodus (Mt 8:1, cf. Ex 34:29). He also uses a phrase similar to “this was so what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled” several times and presents a Jesus who sees his mission as “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6). In fact, we may say that if it weren’t for the whole “Jesus is the Messiah who died for us and who is coming back again” part much of this book would do good service as pious Judaism of the time (as a number of modern Jewish interpreters of the gospels sometimes try to integrate him).³³² Here Jesus is more a critic from inside the tent of Judaism arguing over different interpretations of things such as Torah as compared to John’s Jesus who is the focal point of everything including the Torah itself. So whilst Jesus can get involved in Jewish arguments saying that “for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God” (15:6) and even quotes scripture himself in debate (15:7-9) he does this without being antagonistic to Judaism or Torah as a whole. Jesus indeed, in the recitation of the Transfiguration, even appears side by side with Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the Law and the Prophets (17:1f.) and in Matthew Jesus is presented as on most intimate terms with the Hebrew scriptures as a whole (e.g. 22:29, 26:31, 54-56).

³³² A random example is Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (HarperOne, 2007).

The Gospel of Thomas is not, and has never threatened to be, in either the Hebrew or Christian biblical canons. Yet it is still an interesting, and often controversial, early Christian witness to Jesus. Here the attitude to Jesus is as different to Matthew and John as they were to each other. The gospel presents itself in a prologue as giving secret or hidden sayings “which the living Jesus spoke” and which the eponymous Thomas has written down. The gospel proper starts with an injunction (whether from the living Jesus or Thomas is unclear) to discover “the interpretation of these sayings”. The reward is that they “will not taste death” (GTh 1, cf. Jn 8:51). There is a recurrent theme of seeking in this gospel (e.g. GTh 2, 92) and also of revelation (e.g. GTh 5, 6). Also suggested is that you should “know yourselves” (GTh 3, 5) and what is “within” is praised as important (GTh 45, 67, 70). Yet Jesus is also held up as a fountain (literally) of knowledge (GTh 108, cf. Jn 4) and as a dispenser of “mysteries” (GTh 62). In this he is regarded as superior to the Hebrew scriptures which are mentioned explicitly in GTh 52: “His disciples said to him, Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel and they all spoke of you. He said to them, You have disregarded the living one among you and have spoken of the dead.” Notable in this saying is not only the superiority of Jesus (who is alive where the books are regarded as dead) but that all 24 books of the Hebrew canon are regarded as “prophets”. This matter of Jesus’ aliveness is vital for understanding Thomas as a whole yet without any mention of death or resurrection.

All this suggests to me a book in which the self as a text is instructive for its understanding. Thomas is often said, by people with high academic qualifications, to be a “wisdom” book. But it’s not; it’s a knowledge book. It is about attaining gnosis not sophia, knowledge not wisdom, and then inscribing the text of the self. This is knowledge of the self in the light of an interpretation of the sayings of Jesus in Thomas. Here Jesus not

Torah, not Hebrew scripture, is the text to be understood and gaining the knowledge of its interpretation the text of the self will be revealed. This, in its way, is very kabbalistic but not about the words of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus, a living voice (GTh 59) and the “light over all things” (GTh 77) is important as the guide who possesses all the knowledge and the only salvation he offers is that of knowing (GTh 17, 18, 19). Thus, to seek this knowledge is the be all and end all of the book and encouraging such seeking is the message of Jesus (GTh 92). He has wise, knowledge-filled sayings to impart but it always falls to the interpreter to grasp their meaning. Jesus encourages these seekers to “examine this moment” (GTh 91). This is all surely a fictional take on Jesus but no less than Matthew or John is it an understanding of higher things for the purposes of a kind of salvation. Here, however, knowledge and interpretation are explicit factors in its attainment, knowing the text of Jesus’ sayings and their meaning is all-important.

Revelation, the final book of the Christian New Testament, is a strange text. It claims to be an “apocalypse,” a “testimony of Jesus,” the “word of God” and a “prophecy” and it is also clearly a vision the writer claims to have received (1:1-3). Yet it is also fundamentally made possible by its reliance on the Hebrew bible, not least the visions of Ezekiel and the Danielic “Son of Man” from Daniel 7 and 10. We might even argue that so reliant on such texts is it that it is essentially an example of Christian rewriting of Hebrew texts for a Christian purpose. Revelation is a Quentin Tarantino remake of the victory of God with new dialogue and reordered events supplied by the new writer. This writer seems to know sayings of Jesus when, in the letters to the churches, he uses the phrase “let anyone who has an ear to hear” (e.g. 2:7) and Jesus, although not one any pre-Gospel viewer would recognise, is a main actor in the text.

The “letters to the churches” just mentioned that take up chapters two and three of Revelation also resonate with echoes of Hebrew stories such as Balaam (2:14, cf. Num 22:15 - 24:25), the Israelites being fed by manna (2:17, cf. Ex 16:31), Jezebel (2:20, cf. 1 Kings 16:31 - 19:1) and the building of the Temple (3:12, cf. Ezek 40-48). In addition, the various theophanies of God are recounted in its description of the vision before the speaker (4:5, cf. Ex 19, Is 6:1-4, Ps 29, Dan 7:8 and Ezek 1:4-14) and their are allusions to the creation (21:1 - 22:5, cf. Gen 1-3), to Sodom and Gomorrah (14:10, cf. Gen 19:24) and to the figure of “the Accuser” from Job (12:10, cf. Job 1:6-12) besides many, many other Hebrew bible allusions. Revelation is, then, a patchwork quilt of Hebrew bible reference, intertextuality and reweaving of ideas, stories and events into a new whole. And at the very heart of all this is the idea of books and scrolls with seals that are of eternal portent (e.g. 5:1, 7:3). Most often all these events are recorded by the scribe without explicit recognition but occasionally a direct word of Jesus is injected such as at 16:15. Here it seems that we can say that Torah, Jesus and God himself have all been conceived as a vast textual reservoir that can be rewoven according to the needs of the vision to lay out a textual battle plan for the near future. Jesus is claimed as the general leading this campaign but the Hebrew texts which underlie the entirety of the vision are fundamentally necessary and important if imagining anything and everything the book portrays. The fact that Revelation is itself a text, one guaranteed by Jesus, by God and by the Hebrew scriptures being its very DNA, is one of the clearest examples of a textual theology at play in the Jewish/Christian interpretive matrix of its time.³³³

³³³ Such “rewriting” is contained in the Hebrew bible itself where, for example, Chronicles rewrites much of Samuel and Kings. In addition, a number of Jewish or Christian books collected together under the heading “Old Testament Pseudepigrapha” are rewritten stories of Hebrew bible figures or events. See “Expansions of the ‘Old Testament’ and Legends” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Volume 2 (Doubleday, 1985), pp. 5-475. All this awakens in me the notion that much of religious and literary Judaism is a matter of rewriting or reinterpreting past scriptural events, something that carried over into Christianity.

Text and Interpretation

I have surveyed, all too briefly, several modes of Jewish, and latterly (Jewish-) Christian, interaction with sacred or otherwise important texts. I started with the thoughts of Derrida about text and textuality itself which were entangled, by Sanford Drob, with the textualising thoughts of the Kabbalah and its adherents' imaginings about creation as accomplished with the building blocks of language and its later (inevitable) equation of sacred text, Torah, with the infinite God itself and with this God as creating according to the plan it had made in the Torah. This was seen to be one possible outcome of the rabbinic formulation of Judaism which occurred after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and which carried on for almost 500 years. This rabbinic formulation emphasized both written text and oral traditions of interpretation and translation and involved midrashic practices which could conceive of holy text as something to be rewoven at will without thereby doing it injury since it was regarded as all the divine language of God and, as such, a unity whichever parts were explained by whichever other parts. Within such interpretation the concept of the active, dynamic "word of God," much in evidence in myriad ways in the texts of the Hebrew canon itself, was evident as in the example of the stories of creation that I gave from Targum Neofiti 1 where it was "the word of the Lord" that created ("with wisdom") and where the Torah was evident as active in an understanding of creation itself.

Latterly, in my survey, I had cause to mention the many textual, linguistic and communication-based forms, metaphors and means used in the Hebrew bible (and outside it) in an attempt to show that the rabbinic and Kabbalistic schemes were not barking up the wrong tree but were, instead, expressions of the text and interpretation

of texts that had been going on in the creation of the Hebrew bible itself. Here Torah is sacred, iconic text, covenant is a binding (written) agreement which determines how two parties should act, hymns to Hebrew language and divine law are composed (e.g. Ps 119), the activity of God is written (Joshua - Kings) and rewritten (Chronicles, but also compare Exodus and Deuteronomy), God as actively speaking through prophets and events is recorded in both narratives and the collections of prophetic speech in books and much else besides. This is followed on by Christian texts which trade on this rich Hebraic legacy and that have a need to orientate their own needs to it. John makes his Jesus co-equal with God, as the Kabbalists would later do of God and Torah, Matthew makes Jesus the one who fulfills or completes Torah, Thomas recognises the Hebrew scriptures as "prophets" of God but subsumes them to the living interpretation of Jesus and Revelation reweaves Hebrew scripture for the intertextual production of a Christian message and victory.

But the question remains how we are to understand Jesus, a supposedly historical person, against all of this background. Strangely, here I find the Jewish rabbinic and Kabbalistic interpretational ideas useful for I cannot but conceive that Jesus is (imagined as) a kind of oral interpretation of the text that is God. This certainly seems to be the case in the examples of the texts I briefly covered in my survey here and in others from the New Testament that I can call immediately to mind, such as the Letter to the Hebrews or the authentic Pauline letters, for example. In the former Jesus is described in Hebrew scriptural terms (one such is "as a priest in the order of Melchizedek")³³⁴ and in the latter Paul clearly takes up Jesus as an example of the apocalyptically understood action of God in the world which is what the gospels and Acts do too.³³⁵ So it seems to

334 Cf. Hebrews 5.

335 This is what I take such as 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5-7 to be, at least.

me here that God is conceived of in these writings as a universal textual context and Jesus is presented as one living (Thomas got that bit right) authoritative interpretation of the textual infinity that is God.

This idea moulds to the interpretational strategies of the four Christian texts I made mention of earlier. In John Jesus is both text, God himself, but also authentic interpretation (God, yet also with God). There his words save from death and Torah points to him, the authentic interpretation of God. The textual metaphor is key for the truth is written down (by Moses) and witnessed as Jesus himself claims in the text of this gospel. In Matthew God, revealed in Torah, finds in Jesus its fulfillment. We can almost imagine here that Jesus is actually in the Torah (or it in him) since he is its completion or perfection. "It was always meant to be," says Matthew. In this gospel Jesus says "You have heard it said but I say" and so, once more, he provides the definitive interpretation of God's revelation in Torah. And why should he not? This is what Matthew thinks he is. For Thomas interpretation has become paramount over texts (Hebrew scriptures) and this living interpretation of the greater Text is on-going. What disciples need to do is inscribe its truth within themselves so that they, too, become living witnesses to a knowledge of the truth Jesus has to share. This is why they should "seek" to find the "interpretation" of the knowledge-laden sayings Jesus gives. Finally, in Revelation, the holy texts of the Hebrew scriptures, which are amalgamated with Jesus as divine champion and with the word of God itself as context to the text, are rewoven to tell a story of Christian victory in which Jesus is the speaker (its his "testimony") again providing authentic interpretation of, and witness to, God's Being and purpose and, crucially, recreation of all things. As in Targum Neofiti 1 God's word creates, so in Revelation it recreates.

As my chapter has come full circle, from creation to recreation, so I too go back to my beginning to finish. I began with Sanford Drob's essay on Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah. Here I noted some quotations of the French philosopher in passing:

"There is no outside-text."

"In the beginning is hermeneutics."

"Being is grammar."

"The disappearance of any originary presence is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is truth. Nonpresence is presence."

"The alienation from presence which writing necessarily brings with it."

"Everything belongs to the book before being and in order to come into the world."

I cannot speak to what these mean in the context of Derridean or wider philosophical or literary theoretical contexts; I have done far too little research in any of these areas for that. But I can speak to how I understand them in the context of the discussion I have been having. God is the Text. There is no outside-God. It (not "he" for such Being could not be reduced to objective gender) is Text and Context. All else is hermeneutics, interpretation, exegesis (and often eisegesis). Our being as interpreters is played out against this background. This being is a matter of the grammatical connections of things, fitting in with prevalent grammars or creating new ones in whatever rhizomatic ways are possible. This interprets and shapes Being, creates new ways of being. But the problem with texts, with writing, is that fixity tends to kill that which is fixed, it disappears, and we become alienated from it, we go into exile. Yet it wants to be living, vital, for this is why it ever existed. Hence, along comes the necessity of interpretation, the oral partner to the written. This "nonpresence" becomes the presence the written word lacks,

becomes the nontruth as truth that has absented itself in writing. This is what makes it live. In interpretation our alienation from that made textual can be resolved. All interpretation belongs to the Book. It is of the Book, about the Book and for the Book. The Book is the groundless ground. Its infinity is home, its aporia are interpretive opportunities, its void is the power of the human imagination according to a grammar we have devised. There is no meaning of the Text; there are only interpretations of text that offer constantly insufficient meanings.

Those who write about Jesus in gospels or historical Jesus books know all this, intuitively or explicitly, for Jesus is how they interpret God, an interpretation for the Text they are alienated from yet seek to understand and perhaps even worship or use as a proxy for their hate. In Jesus they see an authentic interpretation, a light, a truth, a lodestone, and they follow it to what they think is its source, the Text. But they never find the Text. They find just nonpresence as presence, nontruth as truth, oral tradition as written tradition: interpretation of text. They find all they have is their interpretation of Text. They find a tool with which to construct. They find a form of life. They find, as I have been saying from the start of my historical Jesus project, that fiction, interpretation, rhetoric, is all they have.

9. Other Gospels, Other Jesuses: Sources for Jesus and Thirteen Interpretational Guidelines for Historical Jesus and Gospel Study

[This chapter is not organic but combines texts from multiple sources in an effort to illustrate the author's textual presuppositions and choices.]

The first thing to say in this relatively short piece is that we have no basis in historical fact or narrative for much biographical detail about Jesus. That the traditional canonical gospels are themselves trying to be biographical, in historical and modern terms, we may provisionally grant. Yet these are not full and detailed biographies in any respect. Jesus gets given some dubious family history in which we are not quite sure if Joseph is his father or not and perhaps some siblings and he is situated in Galilee and specifically Nazareth. But this isn't very much and, virgin birth aside, isn't regarded by much of anybody as very important. What is regarded as important in the historical documents is the things Jesus said and did and this because then those doing the writing can set it in a context and say what they think it means. But not all ancient documents have this purpose.

Meanwhile, scholarly work on the biblical gospels has uncovered the possibility that there were other documents behind the ones we now have that operated as sources of the sayings or deeds of Jesus. For example, there is thought by several scholars to be a document now called Q (from *Quelle*, the German for "source") which was a source document for the gospels of Luke and Matthew (which, it is argued, also relied on Mark as a source as well). Some (although many fewer than for Q) argue that there was a "Signs Source" which was a source of information behind the Gospel of John. Yet others

still argue that there was an earlier version of the Gospel of Mark. Further scholars argue that the document modern scholars call the Gospel of Thomas, a genuine gospel found in the Egyptian desert in 1945, is another collection of sayings of Jesus. The point here is that, as we have it now, this is all a literary process. It is a matter of writing, of literature, of composition. Whilst these possible literary sources may not have been gospels but rather collections of the sayings or deeds of Jesus, we need to remember that the four books Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the Christian Bible are gospels and “gospel”, as is well known, means “good news”. These four books, all of which may well be based on earlier written sources which were not gospels, were created to give a specific message. Their focus is that message and not a Jesus biography, first and foremost. As I have argued in the past, this message is the Christian message and not the teaching of Jesus although, as we might expect if the first Christians built upon and adapted Jesus’ message rather than completely abandoning it, this is contained within them as part of their good news. However, it takes a little detective work (yes, we might openly call this guess work too) to separate Jesus from Christian interpretation. (Why must we do this? Because Jesus was not a Christian!)

So if we were trying to put together some content that we might ascribe to Jesus to try and get some clue as to what he was about how might we go about doing this? This is the problem that every person historically interested in Jesus must face. Such people do not have the option that those with a purely faith-driven theological interest have which is simply to believe that the Bible is true and take it as read. Historians, unlike so many people of faith, should not be apologists. Their inquiries are not done in order to support doctrines or articles of faith. I have read numerous book length histories of Jesus over the years by various Evangelical biblical scholars, for example, which read as

straightforward apologies for the Christian Jesus, Son of God, come to earth. They do not strike me as remotely written with any historical (or even self) awareness whatsoever. More plainly, they are simply apologetic tomes written as part of some imagined culture war in which the participants think they have to fight for their orthodox view of Jesus. Of course, such people have their polar opposites as all such wars today seem to have. In this case such people would probably be represented by The Jesus Seminar, a body which flourished between about 1985 and 2005 under the leadership of liberal biblical scholar, Robert Funk, whose major academic impetus came from John Dominic Crossan (in my view). Funk, so it seems, wanted to find a Jesus that the Evangelicals and Fundamentalists couldn't believe in. All good fun, perhaps, but very obvious and apologetic. In the light of my previous chapters it would be as well to mention that I see a difference between being the person you are, the person who can only find what honestly makes sense to you, and being an apologist. We can't avoid the former but we should avoid the latter.

But that still leaves us with my question: how might we find things Jesus said and did? *There is no other choice except to pick and choose amongst the various documents we have available to us and to say why we accept some sayings, deeds and events and not others. It is a matter of argumentation and persuasion, of sifting what we have according to what strikes us as sensible, reasoned and justified choices. There is no escape from this, either methodological or historical, and no guarantees of any kind. There is no algorithm which finds the historical Jesus without hard work required. Indeed, such categories as "methodological" or "historical" are deployed merely as examples of the argumentation, justification and persuasion we need to provide.* You will find in other places examples of the methods and historical matrices biblical academics and students of early Christianity

use in their studies. These are ones thought convincing for the communities that they are aimed at and each of us can make our own minds up about whether they convince us or not or about what tweaks or changes might be needed to make them more convincing for us. Academics themselves often expend great energy arguing about such things.

In my study here and my presentation of an image of Jesus I am going to cross reference the gospel texts, both the canonical ones, including reconstructions of their putative sources such as that referred to above as Q, and the extracanonical one known as the Gospel of Thomas (hereafter known simply as Thomas and about half of which has parallels in the New Testament gospels itself), to produce what I regard as a bare minimum of material which can be regarded as traditions about Jesus which go back further than any of their current sources yet whilst still being from multiple sources. (Scholars call this a criterion of "multiple attestation".) This is not because of any belief this guarantees this material is from Jesus. It doesn't and *no method could ever guarantee this*. Neither does this imply anything about the dating or tradition histories of the documents referred to. In this study I am not intending to give a completely thorough-going review of all these very interesting and important matters, even though in the end for a full study of these matters it is very necessary, as there is simply not the time. My thinking here is simply that traditions about Jesus which come from multiple different sources yet preserve similarities preserve things that all those who preserved them found important and useful. It will be remembered here that my outline reconstruction was that the Christians did not jettison what Jesus had said and done. Rather, they built upon the things that Jesus had said and done and made Jesus himself more fundamental in the consequences of this. It is hard to see how anyone could say anything at all about Jesus if they are not going to cull information from the gospel

materials in general (widely understood) having made historical judgments about them. So I am going to do exactly this. This “bare minimum” of material may then allow me to introduce other material from these same sources on a coherence principle. But none of this is sure or certain and *at every point it is an interpretive choice* based on what makes sense for me and means something to me. I have no choice in this matter for this is how human inquiry works.

A basic and common, if never universal, understanding of relevant documentary relationships between the earliest Jesus material has it that the gospels of Matthew and Luke used Mark and the documentary source Q as sources (documentary because the copying is so similar that only a prior document could explain the similarities). Some argue they then had their own unique sources, M for Matthew and L for Luke (documents we have no knowledge of), but the most basic suggestion is that Mark and Q were common sources for Matthew and Luke making them both earlier documents than these later gospels. Q was not so much a gospel like them in form in this thinking but merely a collection of Jesus material (mostly sayings), a way to remember things Jesus said and did. Thomas is similar to this in that it is a collection of 114 sayings of (that is, ascribed to) Jesus. The Gospel of John is believed by some scholars to have had a “Signs Source” as a documentary source used when putting together this gospel. This “Signs Source” would not have been a gospel either but another collection of the deeds of Jesus. That collections of the sayings and/or deeds existed, or are reputed to have existed, is evidence itself for the importance of saving and remembering the words and deeds of Jesus in the early Christian community. Here was a person of meaning for them, one so important as to have things written down about him (not a perfunctory

task in the ancient world). For my purposes here things that can be found in the most different sources are the place to start and we can triangulate ourselves from there...

In order to work with the literary-historical gospel material which serves, almost exclusively, as our most pertinent evidence for Jesus (this may be taken as a judgment which relegates the historical worth of Paul in my eyes), I have thought about what is involved in this and produced the following thirteen “interpretational guidelines” for historical Jesus and historical gospel study as a prelude to working on the relevant source texts. They express, in compact form, my views about the gospels and use of them in study of the historical Jesus which results in our interpretations of him. These guidelines are as follows:

1). In modern parlance, and in these guidelines, “gospel” refers to more than one type of literature and may, in shorthand, be regarded as ancient literature concerned with, or witnessing to, Jesus; his words, or deeds, or meaning. Such documents may be canonical or not, evangelistic or for insiders. Confessional or expressly religious designations of gospels (for example pro Mark and anti Thomas) are irrelevant to their putative historical value or worth.

2). In the study of Jesus as an historical character all sources are equal unless historical evidence or justification establishes a hierarchy, order, significance or dependency between them. (For example, Matthew used Mark as a source.)

3). Historical points or arguments rely on historical justification and can only be established by historical means.

- 4). Gospels may contain facts, but they are not themselves facts. They are interpretations of people and events.
- 5). Gospels were not written by direct witnesses, neither by those who knew the historical connections of the events they report. History requires more than believing something because someone wrote it down.
- 6). Gospels furnish, at their best, communicated remembrances or reminiscences of Jesus. Yet any narrative frameworks are fictional, serving literary not historical purposes.
- 7). Gospels are creative, and not merely documentary or testimonial, literature.
- 8). Often, historical verification of gospel events, narrative connections or even people is lost to us in any formal or realistic sense. There is a great deal we do not, and cannot, know.
- 9). Reading any gospel parallel or synopsis to any great extent should establish that gospels do not feel constrained from adding, omitting, altering, splitting, recombining or changing their material, even if it gives an alternative or different take on people, events or meaning from one they plainly know about or have otherwise received.
- 10). Gospels are human literature and evince no special relationship to truth or any putative reality.

11). The building of an interpretation of Jesus from gospel material is construction. Our constructions, as those in gospels, are interpretations and are never wholly coterminous with the man himself. In addition, it is often not possible even to say how coterminous they are or that they are.

12). Gospels sometimes portray events or characters in the context of some significant scripture, pre-eminent belief or doctrinal necessity. This is to say that gospels can contain material because it should be true rather than because it was true.

13). The best literary designation for gospels is fiction. This does not prohibit them from containing or communicating truth yet preserves their fundamentally creative and intentional nature. ..

"Our basic problem with Jesus is that the church has envisaged for him a different gospel from what he envisaged for himself." - James M. Robinson

"The diversity of Christian beginnings is evident in the sources." - Helmut Koester

Sayings Gospel Q

It is one of the curiosities of the New Testament, one noted far too little by the dogmatic, that it contains not one but FOUR gospels. This, as John Dominic Crossan noted at an event publicizing one of his books in July 2015, is "three too many". Surely there should only be one gospel and having four immediately confuses the issue as to what the gospel actually is? Surely, four being allowed, Christianity, in its holy book, has

thereby put the stamp of approval on the idea of multiple and different authentic witnesses to the faith and to the idea that Christianity might actually be represented truly by this expression and that one (and that one and that one)?³³⁶ This is basically the problem of Christian beginnings when, we must insist, there were no authorities over all directing what was allowed and what wasn't. The head of the movement (and it was then a Jewish movement) had been Jesus. But now, whatever you may think happened to him, he wasn't there anymore. So who now was in charge and what should happen next? What, now, did any of these people believe and what did they tell others they believed?

The pious would be quick to point to the Acts of the Apostles which the New Testament suggestively places directly after its four gospels. This book, seemingly Luke's gospel part two,³³⁷ attempts to give an account of what happened next. But it is just one, partial account and it focuses mostly on Peter and then Paul, the latter of whom hadn't even known Jesus in his lifetime! So what of the other disciples and soon to be apostles? What of the women said to be at his cross? What of the crowds in Galilee and then Jerusalem? Did all these people just go back to their mundane lives? Clearly some did not, otherwise I wouldn't be writing, and you wouldn't be reading, about Jesus, the gospels and early Christianity today. Paul, already mentioned in Acts, was clearly an important person for those in later generations of the growing Christian movement because, 300 years later when creeds and canons would be decided on, it was his letters which were included in the newly instituted "New" Testament. In Paul's letters we get clear evidence of what I want to talk about in this chapter which is the fact that there were varying forms of Christian belief that grew up after Jesus' death and not just one.³³⁸ Paul mentions in his letters others who are teaching other things and argues for his way of proceeding over

336 Pietists, of course, will retort that this might suggest multiple authentic expression but not any expression. Quite.

337 Compare Lk 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5.

338 For example, 1 Cor 1:12 and Galatians 1:6-7.

against other ways of proceeding and we see from this that there can have been no overarching authority or any authoritative figure who was travelling around the Eastern Mediterranean correcting people's incorrect views or beliefs about Jesus. There was no party line or singular Jesus party.

It was, of course, probably inevitable that at some point people would begin to write about these beliefs but it seems that the pre-eminent literary form of the time was the epistle or letter, as Paul and some others demonstrate so well in the New Testament. It was only when gospel criticism and an academic interest to distinguish the historical Jesus from his Christian gospel clothes got underway that progress began to be made in discerning the earliest Christianity in all its diversity. This academic activity discovered that Mark was likely the first narrative gospel, composed in the 70s CE, some 40 years after the death of Jesus. It was argued that it came first as scholars concluded that the gospels of Matthew and Luke had actually used it as a written source. So it must have come before them. Since Matthew and Luke knew and used Mark, even to the extent of largely keeping his order of events, these three gospels together became known as the synoptic gospels because they "see together". The Gospel of John, on the contrary, goes its own way, tells its own story and, if it knew of the others, carries on regardless anyway. And there is nothing wrong with that.

But let us stick with Matthew and Luke for the moment. How would we imagine a gospel got written? Was it one man, in a trance, inspired by God, carrying out automatic writing as he was held transfixed by the Holy Spirit? Much as some might like to believe this, it is not likely the case. A more historical suggestion is that gospels came to be written by local Christian communities to record their version of the Jesus story, something they

would want to repeat and recall for liturgical or religious purposes. These communities did not cast around for eyewitnesses or advertise for people to come forward who had been there in doing this. It was not a journalistic enterprise and such people had no resources for such a thing anyway. Even the papyrus or parchment to write on was expensive! Instead, each community would have been the heirs of oral traditions about Jesus which they treasured as remembrances (and heard repeated or performed for them at gatherings). Scholars have done much work on this oral tradition as one historical means to try and demonstrate its reliability.³³⁹ But the gospels, at least the canonical gospels, are also evangelistic. They want to make a case for Jesus and they make this case, largely, to pagan, gentile people of the late first century in the Roman empire. In Mark's gospel when it says, in the very first verse, that Jesus is "the Son of God" it is challenging someone else in the first century who liked to be known as "Son of God": the Roman emperor!

But on with Matthew and Luke. These gospels, as I've already said, used Mark as a written source (which is strange if Matthew is meant to be a disciple of Jesus who was there at the time but I digress!). But there are another slew of agreements between Matthew and Luke that aren't in Mark. These agreements, once more, are of a kind that most scholars think must be based on another document that was used as a written source. The problem is, if this is right then this is (most likely) a document that has never come to light or ever been found in written form. Scholars call this putative document today the Sayings Gospel Q.³⁴⁰ Q stands for "Quelle" which is the German word for

339 On this see Rafael Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury, 2013), Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (SPCK, 2013) and Werner H. Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives* (Baylor University Press, 2009).

340 The treatment of this source in Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (TPI and SCM Press, 1990), pp.128-171, is a standard scholarly one for generally educated readers. To avoid tedious arguments I do not claim all scholars believe Q was a document nor that, formally, it is anything other than a hypothesis. One prominent scholarly voice against the whole idea of Q has been Mark Goodacre, for example. See Mark Goodacre, *The Case*

“source”. So if you ever hear scholars or educated lay people talking about “Q” in a biblical context this is what they are talking about: the material common to Matthew and Luke which isn’t from Mark. Of course, should this Q have existed it would also be prior to those written gospels and it would be a witness to a community who treasured the things that it had preserved. It would be an important document for our understanding of early Christianity. Q is called a “Sayings Gospel” because the contents we can recover from Matthew and Luke’s agreements are mostly not narrative in form. They are largely sayings and this holds out the intriguing prospect that Christians preserved documents which weren’t a connected story about Jesus but just collections of things he said (and/or did). A further interesting thing about Q is that it doesn’t talk about Jesus’ death or resurrection although, of course, if a document form of Q ever did exist we would then learn much more about its full contents than can ever be gleaned from comparing agreements across two books that used it as a source. But, if Q did exist and did mention Jesus’ death and resurrection, it seems that neither Matthew or Luke chose to use such material. Q seems to be, as far as academic reconstruction of its contents can tell, a Sayings Gospel.³⁴¹...

So why is this reconstructed text, with all its gaps, guesses and scholarly attempts at a precise wording, important? John Kloppenborg says the following:

Against Q (Continuum, 2002) and Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique* (InterVarsity Press, 2005). Such as Goodacre must then explain the agreements another, better way, of course.

341 Much of my description here has followed (and will follow) the lead of John Kloppenborg, probably the world’s leading Q scholar for almost 40 years. See John Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Fortress Press, 1987), *Q Parallels: Synopsis, Critical Notes and Concordance* (Polebridge Press, 1988), *The Shape of Q: Signal Essays on the Sayings Gospel* (Augsburg Fortress, 1994), *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Augsburg Fortress, 2000) and *Q, The Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). See also James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Sayings Gospel of Q in Greek and English with Parallels from the Gospels of Mark and Thomas* (Peeters Publishers, 2001), a standard scholarly version of the reconstructed text.

*"Q presents us with a rural, Galilean Jewish gospel, not a gospel that already imagines the extension of the mission of the Jesus movement to Gentile areas and the cultic debates that this extension would provoke. It is this feature of Q that is perhaps the most significant, since along with the letter of James, Q provides us with one of the very few arguable instances of a document produced by and for the earliest Judean (i.e. Jewish) followers of Jesus"*³⁴²

But there is more for he continues:

*"the Sayings Gospel Q represents a different gospel. It is a gospel that circulated not among urbanites, but among the rural poor, not in the Gentile cities of the east, but in the towns of Jewish Galilee. It took significantly different views of miracles, Jesus' death, and Jesus' vindication than what is found in the Synoptics and Paul. Its ethical teachings give us a glimpse of the life and attitudes, not of the urban classes in which the Jesus movement eventually spread, but the villages and towns of the Galilee, where God's actions and reign had everything to do with the basics of life: food, debt, the supports for ordinary life and the threats to it."*³⁴³

In short, Q is a possible witness to something to which the New Testament, as a later canonised collection of authorised books, by itself does not witness to. Of course, you will say that all this text is already in the New Testament - twice over! That's true, but *it is incorporated into larger narrative texts all, thus, subsumed to the meaning of those narratives*. Extracted and exhibited baldy, as scholars like Kloppenborg do in their reconstructions, and set in a historical time and place, it witnesses to something entirely

³⁴² John Kloppenborg, *Q: The Earliest Gospel*, p.69.

³⁴³ Ibid., p.97.

different, a primitive form of Jewish and likely Galilean faith in Jesus, a man of wisdom and teaching. As can easily be seen when one looks at said reconstructions as provided in the books I have footnoted, this material is mostly words of Jesus and, without a narrative framework to shepherd us in our interpretation of it, it gives a different picture of Jesus and one, most Q scholars argue, which is earlier than all the canonical gospels.

It is for this reason alone that many conservative scholars and Christians have often dragged their heels regarding its putative existence for, for some, Q is a witness to a faith in Jesus that is not about the person of Jesus, not least in the idea of an atoning death and resurrection which, as a non-narrative text, we can see is missing. So we can ask questions like were there those in the first two decades after Jesus' death who remembered him as a wise teacher but without any explicit reference to his death and resurrection, something later Christianity (as well as that in other places contemporaneously) would go on to make central to the faith? It seems, at the very least, that the veneration of Jesus in the middle of the first century was perhaps not always about these things. It also seems that even where these things weren't mentioned Jesus was not simply forgotten as irrelevant. I allow John Kloppenborg, once more, to sum up the significance of Q:

"The importance of Q lies not in any new material but rather in the distinctive manner in which it frames and presents its sayings and stories. Q is also distinctive for what it lacks. In Q we get a glimpse of a very early phase of the Jesus tradition that had not yet acquired the features with which we are now so familiar. So while we don't get anything new in Q, what we get is a very different formulation and arrangement of the sayings that we know

*from much later writings. We also have a document that lies behind the canonical Gospels and behaves differently from them. This makes a difference.”*³⁴⁴

The Gospel of Thomas

If the Sayings Gospel Q is controversial in some quarters due to the fact it is a reconstructed text which, by itself, seems to witness to something other than an affirmation of later gospel narratives then, with the Gospel of Thomas, we turn that controversy up several more notches. At least Q, as text, can already claim to be in the New Testament. It, therefore, cannot be avoided for it is “holy scripture”. The Gospel of Thomas, however, is (half) not in the New Testament and before 1945, when a Coptic translation of its text was found in the desert at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, many might even have doubted its existence despite the few Greek fragments of its text which had turned up elsewhere in Egypt some decades earlier. I imagine that even today there are those who wish that it didn’t exist.³⁴⁵ Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings “the living Jesus spoke”. They are given almost entirely without narrative context and they are not contextually arranged or narratively connected one with another. A good number, almost half but by no means all, have parallels to texts inside the New Testament gospels. However, Jesus’ death and resurrection, as with Q, is absent. One Sayings Gospel that is incorporated into the New Testament is one thing. But two, and one not even in the New Testament, is another! This is a possible basis, some suggest, for thinking that there was a historical gospel genre that was a collection of the sayings of Jesus. And, contrary to many Christian commentators since, it would suggest that Jesus’

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

³⁴⁵ A standard scholarly treatment of Thomas is found in Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, pp.75-128. See also the essays in Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 84; Brill, 2013) which are the basis for what follows, especially the essay “The View from Across the Euphrates”, pp.9-32.

death and resurrection was not the be all and end all from the first, the core message that could not be left out as, for example, Paul insists.

One scholar who would agree with this view seems to be the leading Thomas scholar, Stephen Patterson. In his essay "The View From Across the Euphrates" he makes a broadly persuasive case for the context and geographical location of Thomas's creation, something which not only goes some way to explaining why it is like it is but also to explaining why other gospels and the letters of Paul, which now make up orthodox Christianity, are why they are. Patterson notes the problem from the perspective of much later students of this Christian period in that "Paul, John, and especially the synoptic gospels have so shaped the way we understand earliest Christianity that it has almost become impossible to imagine Christian origins in a different way."³⁴⁶ The trouble for the orthodox is that Q and Thomas give up insights which enable us to do just that. Patterson asserts that "in the Gospel of Thomas we have the fundamental evidence for the potential of the Jesus tradition to develop differently."³⁴⁷

Patterson's belief, after over 25 years of study of the document, is that Thomas "represents an autonomous development of the Jesus tradition that is more or less independent of the synoptic tradition"³⁴⁸ (that is Mark or Q or any other sources in Matthew and Luke). Around half of Thomas has synoptic parallels and so it would be expected that copyists and scribes may have introduced harmonizing tendencies where they came across similar sayings in different books. Outside influence is always possible during the processes of scribal transmission. However, Patterson suggests that a consensus is forming that Thomas "was not composed by an author who went about

³⁴⁶ Patterson, "The View from Across the Euphrates," p.31.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., pp.11-12.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p.11.

extracting sayings from one or another of the synoptic gospels.”³⁴⁹ Patterson dates Thomas, which he notes is a mere list of sayings, to a time period broadly contemporaneous with the canonical gospels (ca. 70-120 CE). However, he does also note that “the collection we know as the Gospel of Thomas generally originated relatively early, before the synoptic gospels had reached their eventual ascendant status, and when oral tradition was still the dominant mode of communicating the Jesus tradition.”³⁵⁰ Notable here is that designation as a list, however. Since Thomas has no narrative it would be relatively easy to add a saying... or leave one out. And who would ever know as there are no narrative connections? Patterson acknowledges this makes the document hard to date with pinpoint precision. Crossan, in *The Historical Jesus*, puts a first version of Thomas in his first stratum of textual material, dating it before 60 CE.³⁵¹ Whilst Patterson is not formally ruling that out, that designation as a list remains of importance. Many of these sayings are likely as early as anything in the Jesus tradition we have access to. But formally dating a finished document is something about which less precision is possible.

Even a dating contemporaneous with the canonical gospels is of interest though if it turns out that what we have is a witness to a completely different way of remembering Jesus. These differences are explained by Patterson in that he situates the writing of the gospel in Edessa,³⁵² then a Syrian town that was not in the Roman empire as it was east of the Euphrates which was, at the end of the first century CE, the eastern border of the empire. This, Patterson argues, makes a huge difference. For one thing, no Jesus follower in Edessa was going to be persecuted for their faith. It was the Romans who did

349 Ibid.

350 Ibid., p.13.

351 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp.427-428.

352 Patterson, “The View from Across the Euphrates,” p.14.

that. But Edessa wasn't part of Rome. So in contrast to people like Paul, who faced trouble from Rome throughout his Christian existence and was eventually put to death by the Romans, this Thomas community was free of such threats. Patterson suggests that this explains why Paul, and much of the rest of the New Testament, has such a focus on Jesus' death as of primary importance. Many Christians within the Roman empire were put to death for their faith. Their saviour and the focus of their faith was also put to death by Rome. In Jesus, then, such Christians had a model and a forebear in suffering. It made perfect sense that they, seemingly put in a similar situation, or with its threat constantly hanging over them, would zero in on this fact. Mark's gospel, as one example, has often been noted as basically a story of how Jesus suffered and died with an extended introduction. Patterson speaks of gospels like Mark, the model for Matthew and Luke, or John as "a martyr's story".³⁵³

Thomas, in comparison, is a wisdom gospel. Its words come from "the living Jesus" and it is presented as secret wisdom which, should you understand it, means you "will not taste death" (GTh 1). It is a thinker's book not a book to embolden those who may be thrown to wild beasts or burnt with fire on the whim of some Roman official. Contrary to those who, on Thomas's discovery, immediately decried it as "Gnosticism", as many of its conservative critics have ever since, Patterson argues for its entanglement with Platonism and especially Middle Platonism as he explains in his essay "Jesus Meets Plato".³⁵⁴ For Patterson, Thomas is instead "a prime illustration"³⁵⁵ of early Christian diversity. Of course, the description "Christian" is here contentious and part of the debate here revolves around what is Christian at all. Strictly speaking, perhaps, there was not yet any "Christianity" in the first century, albeit that the historical winners of

³⁵³ Ibid., p.26.

³⁵⁴ Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, pp. 33-59.

³⁵⁵ Patterson, "The View from Across the Euphrates," p.9.

that debate have read back the winning orthodoxy into the past, verified by their chosen documents in the New Testament. For such people a concentration on Jesus' death and his supposed resurrection is Christianity and all else is unacceptable deviation or deliberate falsehood. But, as Q and Thomas show, other flavours of following Jesus after his death existed and diversity was a historical reality. In both cases connection with early "orthodoxy" is maintained in any case. Q is in Matthew and Luke and about half of Thomas is shared with the canonical gospels. So even if "the canonical story is the Christian story because it is seen as the original story"³⁵⁶ history protests as long hidden witnesses to early forms of following Jesus a different way are revealed.

Much of the New Testament, including its gospels, is focused on the end, on eschatology. Thomas, on the other hand, is focused on protology, the beginning. Given such an orientation, Jesus' death and his resurrection, or anybody else's for that matter, is simply not relevant. Thomas is concerned with things returning to their original perfection whereas what would become the New Testament kind of belief is concerned with how God might finish things off. This encompasses much apocalyptic imagery which is also largely absent from Thomas. Whereas Mark, for example, wants to describe an apocalyptic vision of the future in Mark 13, Thomas simply makes no attempt to do a similar thing. This may also be related to the location of the Thomas community in Edessa which was remote from Jerusalem and Palestine in general which, between 66 and 135 CE, suffered the disaster of two rebellions leading to two wars, the first of which destroyed the Jerusalem Temple Jesus is once said to have disrupted. Of course, it has still not been rebuilt to this day. This, it is argued, tinged the Christian message now found inside the New Testament with the reality of religious violence and the need to

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p.10.

escape it. In Edessa, of course, no Jesus follower feared or experienced such violence so there was no need to use or react to it.

For Patterson, then, "Thomas demonstrates that the possibilities for interpreting the Jesus tradition were multiple. The cross and resurrection was not the only possible focus for early Christian preaching: the coming apocalypse was not the only way of imagining the future". Patterson also notes the antipathy towards "the Jews" inside the canonical gospels, there, perhaps, because those Christian communities were in active opposition to their Jewish counterparts on a day to day basis. This was seemingly not so in Edessa as most of this invective, such as Matthew having the Jewish crowds call down blame for Jesus's crucifixion upon their heads, is missing in Thomas. But what does all this show? Patterson again:

*"As natural and original as the canonical story appears to those who have inherited it as scripture, when viewed from across the Euphrates looking back, it seems more clearly **to have been a choice**. What we have marked as an absence from the Gospel of Thomas is to be marked just as clearly as a presence in the canonical gospels. To narrate the story of Jesus as a martyrdom, as part of an unfolding cosmic drama, in which "the Jews" are cast in the role of adversaries - these are not simply the natural ingredients of the Jesus story. They were chosen for their value in stating the meaning of contemporary events and the experience of Jesus followers living as dissidents in the Roman empire."* (emphasis mine)³⁵⁷

What we are left with is the notion that "The Jesus tradition was and is polyvalent".³⁵⁸

The traditions in Q, Mark, John, Paul... *and Thomas* take what was there and utilise it *as it*

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p.26.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p.31.

was felt necessary for their communities and their experience of life as Jesus followers. Each community *made choices*.³⁵⁹ This was because their experience was surely not everywhere uniform just as it isn't even today in which denominations and forms of Christian belief are multiple. The notion of early Christian unity in one belief is not just mythical, it is false (as *multiple* gospels should demonstrate). And, what's more, the idea that all Jesus' followers had to focus on his death, much less that, as some, including gospel writers, maintain, he actively taught this himself as a definitive strand of his teaching, is now also highly dubious. This, in the end, is why the conservative defenders of Christian orthodoxy, as they see it, focus their apologetics on texts like Thomas and seek to belittle or devalue them at every turn. Put simply, they threaten and devalue their cherished fictional narrative of choice for, as Patterson notes in another essay, "Anyone who writes today on the historical question of what Jesus said and did must deal with the issue of the Gospel of Thomas."³⁶⁰

359 The thrust of, Ibid., pp.27-32.

360 "The Gospel of Thomas and Historical Jesus Research" in Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, pp.119-139 (119).

10. Deconstructing Jesus

*"The frailty of human memory should distress all who quest for the so-called historical Jesus. Even were one to hold, as I do not, that eyewitnesses or companions of eyewitnesses composed the canonical Gospels, our critical work would remain. Personal reminiscence is neither innocent nor objective. Observers habitually misperceive, and they unavoidably misremember. As Thucydides remarked long ago, 'Different eyewitnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories' (Hist. 1.22)."*³⁶¹

"All of us are, to one degree or another, fabulists, even when we try not to be" claims American biblical scholar, Dale Allison, at the beginning of his 2010 book, *Constructing Jesus*. I must confess from the start here that I have a lot of respect for Professor Allison. When I was an undergraduate first learning of what, back then, it was still OK to call "the Quests of the Historical Jesus", his *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*³⁶² was one of the contemporary books that really stood out for me. It had strident and well researched things to say not only about how Allison saw Jesus as a historical figure but also about the legitimacies and illegitimacies of contemporary methods of claiming to do history about him. As I come to reading *Constructing Jesus*, I see that 12 years of further thought has not made him any less courageous in departing from "the way things have been or should be done" and going his own way.

But we have had an update between the former and the latter book. It was after 1998 when his former book was published that New Testament studies had a renaissance of

³⁶¹ This is the opening paragraph of Dale Allison's *Constructing Jesus*.

³⁶² Dale Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Fortress, 1998).

interest in oral tradition and especially memory studies and these concerns wormed their way into the writing of those concerned to write about Jesus and the gospels more explicitly. So here with Allison - who begins with dire warnings of memory's fallibility. Consider, for example, the following 10 points all culled from Allison's opening chapter of *Constructing Jesus*:

- 1). Allison notes that memory is "not a tape." Memory is fundamentally reconstructive.
- 2). Allison thinks that memory is "more like writing a book than reading a book."
- 3). Allison notes that post-event information sullies, shapes and alters the "pristine" memory.
- 4). Allison reminds us that we remember from our current situation or context.
- 5). Allison is wary of the fact that memories lose detail over time.
- 6). Allison thinks that individuals and collectives "transmute memories into meaningful patterns."
- 7). Allison points out that groups forget what they can't use in the present moment. It literally becomes of no use to them.
- 8). Allison is cognisant of the fact that when memory becomes story "narrative conventions inescapably sculpt the result."

9). Allison suggests that memories are subject to time displacement. This means that we may remember things in the wrong place chronologically.

10). Allison reminds us that there is no necessary correlation between strength of feeling and accurate remembrance. How much you feel you've remembered something correctly has no necessary correlation with how accurately you actually did remember something.

This is all sobering stuff and Allison gives a good impression in his opening chapter of actually being sobered. For example, he writes there that:

"The fallibility of memory should profoundly unsettle us would-be historians of Jesus. We have no cause to imagine that those who remembered him were at any moment immune to the usual deficiencies of recall. When we additionally reflect on the common errors of human perception and the human proclivity for tall tales, and then take full cognizance of the strong ideological biases of the partisan sources that we have for Jesus as well as their frequent differences from each other, doubts are bound to implant themselves in our souls, send out roots, and blossom. Even where the Gospels preserve memories those memories cannot be miraculously pristine; rather, they must often be dim or muddled or just plain wrong."

What this means for Allison is that things cannot go on as they have been. The traditional historical researches of New Testament scholars into the historical Jesus, based on standard criteria are, for Allison, just not working out. So Allison attempts to change tack:

"I wish, throughout this book, to explicate my conviction that we can learn some important things about the historical Jesus without resorting to the standard criteria and without, for the most part, trying to decide whether he authored this or that saying or whether this or that particular event actually happened as narrated."

This seems initially intriguing. The "without resorting to standard criteria," criteria which Allison's own scholarship has done much to undermine, is certainly welcome, just as welcome as the "without, for the most part, trying to decide whether he authored this or that saying or whether this or that particular event actually happened as narrated" is enigmatic. As a reader I immediately wanted to know how Professor Allison planned to pull the rabbit from the hat.

It is here that Allison makes the reveal. His great hermeneutical tool is to be THE GIST of the gospels, especially the synoptic gospels! We may also term this "recurrent attestation" or "repeating patterns". If you'd like this idea formulated as a criterion Allison does so in his opening chapter:

"The larger the generalization and the more data upon which it is based, the greater our confidence. The more specific the detail and the fewer the supporting data, the greater our uncertainty."

Allison wants to follow this up by reassuring the nervous reader:

"I am not, I should emphatically add, urging that all the stories in the Gospels must be unhistorical (I am far from being so skeptical) or that our sources fail to preserve some

aphorisms of Jesus (again, my doubt is scarcely that large). That is, I am not, a priori, deciding how much history is or is not in the Gospels (which, in any event, is unfeasible, given how often my mind shifts on the issue). Rather, I am making a point about method, about how we may proceed, and contending that the historian should heed before all else the general impressions that our primary sources produce. We should trust first, if we are to trust at all, what is most likely to be trustworthy. This requires that we begin, although we need not end, by asking, 'What are our general impressions?'"

Allison's essential approach (not method as he himself warns us) is to argue that the gospels, especially the synoptics which he favours, should be scanned for their general impressions of Jesus. We should look for recurring themes and pre-eminent beliefs in their portrayals. Then, "once recurrent attestation highlights a theme or motif, we should seek to interpret that theme or motif in the light of early Judaism, and in such a way that helps us make sense of what we otherwise know about Christian origins." Here Allison calls us to remember the approach of a fellow American scholar who worked especially in the last quarter of the 20th century, E.P. Sanders.³⁶³ Sanders was notable for his approach to the historical Jesus in that he refused a criteria-led way of going about it, preferring instead to work from what he regarded as relatively secure facts (such as "Jesus was crucified") and then to attempt to explain these facts in the light of any evidence. Allison states that he agrees with Sanders' approach on at least two counts:

"First, I doubt anyone's ability to demonstrate that Jesus composed or did not compose very many of the sentences attributed to him. Second, I concur that we should proceed by abduction - that is, by inference to the best explanation, always looking for a Jesus who

³⁶³ In two books, *Jesus and Judaism* from 1985 and *The Historical Figure of Jesus* from 1993, E.P. Sanders attempted to do historical Jesus study working from what he regarded as relatively secure "facts" which he laid out from the start.

makes the most sense of the available facts and what we otherwise know of Judaism and nascent Christianity."

This sounds, on the face of it, quite reasonable. Yet Allison still has more warnings to give us about what happened in the formative period before the gospels, our major literary witnesses to Jesus, in his opening chapter. For example:

"Even if one grants, for the sake of discussion, that eyewitnesses initiated the tradition and repeated parts of it again and again to multiple audiences, their initial and later tellings cannot have been unsullied by selective recall and distortion. This is because nobody's retrieval is immune to such. Retellings of the past are habitually shaped by (1) the mere prospect that there will be listeners; (2) a speaker's aims; (3) expectations about the interests and attitudes of auditors; and (4) the behavior and reactions of the latter. Context affects what one deems possible, appropriate, or desirable to discuss, and speakers will add, subtract, and distort in order to please and entertain, as well as to forestall negative reactions."

Allison is particularly good at pointing out here both that people remember what is useful to them but also that they remember in ways that work for them and their purposes. So "The generalization that 'a particularly pervasive source of misinformation is one's own repeated retrievals and recountings' cannot have found its exception among early Christians." Allison does not think that early Christians have special powers of objective, truthful memory that all the rest of us mortals have never been privy to. On the contrary, our fallibilities are also theirs. That being the case, we cannot rely on specifics. Instead, we must rely on the general gist of things... or regard that we have

nothing reliable at all. (It is often a humorous truism of historical Jesus studies that the worker in this field basically has the choice of a synoptic Jesus or nothing to choose from.) Here Allison repeats his notion that, in his view, its highly unlikely that the gospel writers remembered specific details of Jesus' life or teaching correctly yet got their overall impressions completely wrong.

This immediately becomes a pre-eminent issue in Allison's second chapter which restates his long-held view that Jesus was an "apocalyptic prophet." Allison's reasoning for this view is in accord with his preferred method here as already described: "The most obvious and sensible reason for drawing this inference is simply a mass of relevant sayings in the extant sources." Jesus in the (synoptic!) gospels is an apocalyptic prophet so Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. One immediate issue here, and one I think Allison never quite resolves, is what an expressly "apocalyptic" prophet is. Many of those who do not agree with Allison would happily describe Jesus as an eschatological prophet. I myself am one. But is "apocalyptic" a descriptor for eschatology, a kind of eschatology, or is it synonymous with eschatology? I don't believe that Allison ever does enough work in at least this book to make it clear how he is using the word "apocalyptic." He does attempt to, however:

"By 'apocalyptic prophet' I do not mean that Jesus belonged to any supposed 'apocalyptic movement.' Nor do I hold that his teaching featured the defining traits of the extant written apocalypses. If one insists on associating the adjective apocalyptic with timetables, numerology, and esoterism, with revelatory ascents, mythological beasts, and map-like forecasts, then apocalyptic is the wrong word for Jesus, who, in our sources, is innocent of such interests."

In addition, Allison regards "apocalyptic" as:

"convenient shorthand for a cluster of themes well attested in post-exilic Jewish literature, themes that were prominent in a then-popular account of the world that ran, in brief, as follows. Although God created a good world, evil spirits have filled it with wickedness, so that it is in disarray and full of injustice. A day is coming, however, when God will repair the broken creation and restore scattered Israel. Before that time, the struggle between good and evil will come to a climax, and a period of great tribulation and unmatched woe will descend upon the world. After that period, God will, perhaps through one or more messianic figures, reward the just and requite the unjust, both living and dead, and then establish divine rule forever."

So, in Allison's view:

"if Jesus publicly promoted some version of this story, which makes for profound discontinuity between the present and the future, and if that story was integral to his message and self-conception, and if, furthermore, he hoped that its denouement was near, then we may fairly label his eschatology "apocalyptic."

In that last quotation you will see that Allison is describing a kind of eschatology as "apocalyptic" and he regards this as the kind of eschatology that Jesus had. But as I read his book, and his second, eschatological chapter especially, I'm not at all convinced he sticks to that. Nevertheless, at this point Allison builds a catalogue of 32 separate texts from his "mass of relevant sayings in the extant sources." This is a trick he is going to pull again and again throughout his book and the logic is as already explained: if there is so

much stuff saying Jesus was this or that, or thought like this or that, or was seen like this or that, then he was this or that... or we have nothing at all to go on.

Yet it is precisely here that I start to have my doubts about what Allison is trying to do in *Constructing Jesus*. I begin to wonder if Allison has given himself any right to start listing catalogues of texts after his first chapter, a chapter in which his analysis of human memory and his inclusion of any early Christian traditions in its fallibilities was seemingly so sobering and all-encompassing. But now here he is quoting texts. What are these texts? Who says them? What is their history? Allison shows no interest in engaging such questions believing, instead, they simply stand all together, silently, like textual Spartacuses. All are Spartacus and none shall speak of its individual past. Here I note that an appeal to the general is one thing but what it isn't is an appeal to specifics or to relations that are explicitly detailed. It seems to me that if you talk about specifics then you need specifics about them too. So in this case we know that the tradition is eschatologized because we can all read it and see but "By who?" and "What for?" are vital questions, and ones that Allison's generalisms simply avoid answering. It seems to me that Allison wants his cake and to eat it.

So also, in Allison's apocalyptically eschatological frame of reference, the idea of "the futurity of the kingdom" about which Jesus clearly speaks in the (synoptic!) gospels. Did Jesus preach and expect some future event (so Allison) or not? If not, was this put there by Christian recitation and written as a response to the non-presence of Jesus (so me)? In my own mind I wonder what else the early Christians would do as a response to the disappearance (for whatever reasons) of Jesus? Would they pretend he was there when he wasn't? It seems to me that a near future action of God was their only choice meaning

that “apocalyptic eschatology” is likely to be their interpretive framework regardless of what they receive from history to work with. “Apocalyptic eschatology” will likely be their own redactive context and proclivity. After all, Jesus was gone; they surely wanted him to come back. So, taking this on board, I see no reason why we must, a priori, impute a future eschatology, an apocalyptic one, to Jesus. For him, it might very well be about his present and that’s enough. But for the Christians who worship an absented Jesus he must come back in the future.

Allison, however, continues with his interpretive approach and is boldly outrageous:

“As for the question of authenticity, this chapter will nowhere attempt to demonstrate that Jesus formulated any of the sayings in my catalog. Surely some of them are secondary; maybe many or even most of them are secondary. It does not matter. For my argument is this: our choice is not between an apocalyptic Jesus and some other Jesus; it is between an apocalyptic Jesus and no Jesus at all... Sometimes parasites kill the host.”

Allison does not intend to give readers the option to separate writerly views *about* Jesus from the views *of* Jesus. For him, the (synoptic!) gospels as they are are all we’ve got. You take the medicine as its given or you take no medicine at all. Here he sounds very like Robert M. Price, an atheist biblical scholar who argues there likely never was a Jesus and that the texts of the New Testament are myths. “If all this is wrong then the entirety can’t be trusted” is exactly the kind of argument Price makes in his own books. The only difference between the atheist Price and the Christian Allison here is that Price chooses not to believe the gospels as they are and Allison does. So Allison, in the end, reverts to an “as it is or nothing” historiography. It all strikes me as very religious, very “my whole

profession may be based on a tissue of unverifiable data but, since its written as it is, I'm going to believe it as a framework anyway (and, besides, my only other choice is an empty void of nothing)". Allison has shown from the beginning of his book that he likes to qualify everything but he still ends up believing some very specific things without quite saying specifically why. "Because I choose to believe the Synoptics and Paul" seems the most amenable interpretation of the gist of his text or as he puts it, "There is a social constraint upon memory." Yet surely which constraints those are depends on which social grouping you ask? In trusting the New Testament and generalizing both it and discussion about memory, Allison forgets any specifics in betting all on the gist of the redacted level of the gospel product that can only exist because later Christians a generation or more after Jesus wanted it to.

But the catalogue of generalisms continues. Here are ten from his eschatological chapter on why Allison finds the apocalyptic Jesus of the synoptics to be true to history:

1). First we have the apocalyptic Paul, for example the one found in our oldest extant Christian document, 1 Thessalonians. Allison also notes the use of the Aramaism "Maranatha" (Come Lord!) in 1 Corinthians 16 which clearly has a future reference.

2). Allison argues that the disciples thought Jesus would return to Jerusalem which is why, for example, some seem to be there in Acts.

3). Allison says that there is apocalyptic eschatology, or some trace of it, in all first century CE Christian documents we know of with the exception of the very short and non-theological letters Philemon and 2+3 John.

4). Allison argues that Paul persecuted (apocalyptic?) eschatologically-minded Christians within a few years of Jesus' death and asks if they have had time to eschatologise an originally non-eschatological message in this time frame. Here is one example where I think Allison seems to be mixing up eschatology and apocalyptic, perhaps even using them interchangeably. Or, put more simply, I wonder if he has done enough to suitably nuance or distinguish the eschatology of Jesus, which many would agree was a focus of his, from those who survive him and believe in him explicitly as the future component of *their* apocalyptic eschatology. Are we to assume that Allison flatly equates them as *exactly the same*? If so, how does he justify this?

5). Allison argues for a "double discontinuity" if the "Jesus the apocalyptic prophet" research program is not followed. John the Baptist, his forbear, was apocalyptic in tone. So were those who preached Jesus after his demise. We need to explain two discontinuities if Jesus is not continuous with them.

6). Allison points out that Peter, who knew Jesus, and James, his brother, both thought Jesus rose from the dead "on the third day" in the testimony of Paul (1 Cor 15:3-7). The Synoptics, John and Acts all agree with this belief and none give an alternative. This is repeating testimony.

7). Allison concentrates on what the early Christians chose to say had happened to Jesus (*if* they chose, of course). From numerous choices extant in the historical context of Jewish thought Jesus' closest followers chose resurrection of the dead (more usually understood communally in historical context) to express what had happened to Jesus.

Allison argues this is due to beliefs extant before Jesus' death. "Easter faith may have been born after the crucifixion but it was conceived before."

8). Allison notes that Jesus chose 12 disciples, a figurative Israel.

9). Jesus, in the New Testament, is compared to others, for example, John the Baptist in the gospels and Theudas and Judas the Galilean in Acts, who all had some form of eschatological (apocalyptic?) agenda.

10). Allison contends that Jesus does not need to be consistently interpreted to be an apocalyptic prophet. If we acknowledge that he taught wisdom or gave moral teaching these are not strikes against this interpretation of Jesus.

In addition to these we may append the following propositions, ones that Allison calls "a number of propositions that some in our discipline now reckon outdated, even naive" but that he regards his argument as supporting. They include that:

A). The Synoptics as they stand, not Q or Q2 or Q3 or the Gospel of Thomas, are our best sources for the historical Jesus because they contain the most memories of him.

B). John the Baptist, who was an apocalyptic prophet, baptized Jesus.

C). Christianity began as a Jewish messianic sect that we can profitably classify as a millenarian movement.

D). Some people who knew Jesus and regarded themselves as proponents of his cause believed, within a few days of his crucifixion, that God had raised him from the dead.

E). Some of those same people believed that his life fulfilled many oracles in Scripture, and they expected him to return soon.

All of this has Allison very much nailing his colours specifically to the synoptic Jesus and, notably, to a Jesus as the synoptics (and not sources or tradition histories for them) present him. Here Allison insists that:

"I am not here contending for a naive or robust confidence in the historicity of the Synoptics. Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain legends and embody specifically Christian concerns; and, together with their sources, they must commit all 'the sins of memory' cataloged at the beginning of chapter 1. What I do maintain is that the materials gathered into the Synoptics, however stylized and otherwise distorted, descend from narratives and sayings that were in circulation and widely valued from early times, and that we may reasonably hope to find in those Gospels, above all in their repeating patterns, some real impressions or memories that, taken together, produce more than a faint image. Bolstering this hope is the fact that, while the Synoptic Jesus often appears to be an apocalyptic prophet, we can infer his status as such from the foundational beliefs of the earliest churches. In other words, what we otherwise know of primitive Christianity corroborates the general impression that we gather from the Synoptics. Although barnacles cover the rock, we can still see the rock's shape."

So we see that Allison is intending to consistently follow through on his approach of “recurrent attestation” or “repeating patterns” in the (synoptic!) documents we have as they are. But what does this mean for his enquiry? I think it means that he finds “the continuity Jesus”. Allison, in his approaches and procedures, seems the perfect scholarly example of what Burton Mack has spent decades counselling against: the acceptance of the synoptic framework even when one becomes agnostic about the specifics of its content. Is this a tenable position for a biblical scholar whose job might reasonably be thought to include the history of texts and not just their canonical exposition? Can we not counter Allison’s generalized observations with our own that specifically Christian eschatology is precisely a future eschatology because it is the return of Jesus that is its focus? Does this hypothesis not account for the data just as well as that the origin is Jesus himself as Allison, following the synoptics, contends? How would we go about finding this difference if we wanted to look for it? Is Allison interested in doing such work? There can be no doubt that most, if not all, canonical Christians were oriented towards a future, apocalyptically articulated eschatology. It was, after all, entirely focused on Jesus’ return. So, one must ask, why would they find (or include in their biblical canon) anything else? The argument is precisely *why* they are that and *if there were other historical options*. But, given Allison’s chosen approach, it seems that there will be some historical alternatives he looks askance at.

One weak spot here, on specifically eschatological turf, is Allison’s idea of a continuity from John the Baptist through Jesus to the first Christians. Allison seems to maintain this was a thematic continuity. But were the Christians who wrote 1 Thessalonians or Mark or Revelation preaching, or even repeating, the message of John the Baptist? It would seem bold and, frankly, incorrect to suggest so. So in what sense is the

“continuity” of which Allison speaks active and is it really a “continuity” at all? John the Baptist seems not to have thought in any other terms except those well within the bounds of a multi-faceted Judaism of the time, ones focused on repentance and symbolic washing. In what sense is even the Jesus of the synoptics continuous with this, let alone the Christians who write what will become the New Testament? The Christians will go on to make Jesus himself the centrepiece of their clearly apocalyptic eschatology. So is it Allison’s submission that, for example, the sayings given to John the Baptist about a coming one are to be regarded as authentic and, if so, how have these sayings managed to escape his otherwise near universal refusal to do tradition critical work? Or is it merely a case of “the synoptics say it, I believe it”? It all seems to me to be a very generalistic statement which, as in other places, lacks the nitty gritty, fine detailed work which will either prove its authenticity or show it to be a merely surface level conclusion. Were we to say they were simply all variously eschatologically interested parties I’m sure few would disagree.

But Allison speaks specifically of “continuity” and that’s an entirely different matter for it is relatively easy to argue that while they were all eschatologically interested parties they might not all be completely similar in their expression or demonstration of it. We could at least then discuss the nuances of their eschatological views. Again, I must emphasize that it is exactly the *content* of the views, and not merely their later lined up presentation in eschatologically interested books, that is at issue here. Yet Allison refuses to engage that discussion preferring to quote masses of texts he refuses to source instead. This is an argument for what writers believe or for what is written not for what the characters in their texts believed. Historical work should critique the texts to establish any historical actors’ beliefs not simply take them as read. Such would seem

particularly injurious to John the Baptist in this case who could not have been any sort of proto-Christian as the synoptics make him.

Assuming the narrative becomes relevant again in Allison's third chapter of *Constructing Jesus* which examines Jesus' views about himself. Here Allison notes that "all the primary sources repeatedly purport that Jesus had astounding things to say about himself. One can dissociate him from an exalted self-conception only through multiple radical surgeries on our texts." This theme of textual excision or emendation as "surgery," and often of a radical, "life-threatening" kind, is repeated throughout the book. Allison seems to have come to the view that such things are without foundation and so, as such, the text should be left alone and explained historically as it is. It seems that, for Allison, arguing that this bit is historical to one person and another bit to another is without any justification or foundation at all. This, in itself, is interesting when his title includes the word "imagination" in it and "historical imagination" is what a number of historians or historiographical theorists generally would argue doing history is about. Since we ourselves cannot be in the past to experience it all we can do is imagine how it might have fit together (and imagine it wasn't necessarily as its preservers would have us believe). Allison is allowed to find some ways of doing that better than others but that doesn't, of itself, make the other ways invalid or, necessarily, less useful either.

In fact its at this point that Allison's whole conception of history becomes a matter of readerly focus. For example, in this third chapter Allison says, "My ambition in this chapter is... to relate the methodological reflections developed in chapter 1 to the genesis of Christology. The limited goal is to think as a historian and to let the facts, as best I can make them out, mean what they may." Allison doesn't say what "thinking as a

historian" entails *but I'm pretty sure it doesn't involve simply reading texts as they are!* Allison, if I may say so, sees history as a catalogue of questions to which there is only ever one answer, the right answer, and all the rest must be wrong. Yet how, in that case, does he imagine that equally pious and sincere biblical interpreters can come to such differing conclusions besides using different methodological approaches? The truth is that facts never "mean what they may". Facts mean what they mean when related to other facts, interpretations and grids of understanding by people situated in their own contexts. This is why the very same facts can mean wildly differing things for different people. A fact never has one interpretation. The very fact of interpretation necessitates an ever expanding multitude of interpretations. Historians must entertain the notion that Jesus was (and is) many things to many people and usually with good reason (and that is assuming that they don't get Nietzschean about it and accept that "facts is what there is not, only interpretations", as Nietzsche suggests in his surviving notebooks).

So it is not surprising in chapter three that Allison finds "christocentric eschatology". Neither is it surprising that, in Allison's view:

"christocentric eschatology was not Paul's alone, for the expectations of 1 Thessalonians are no anomaly. They belong rather to a much larger pattern: Jesus is the axis of all things eschatological also in Acts and the non-Pauline Epistles as well as in the Jesus tradition itself. On this matter, the extant sources are at one: Jesus does not just announce the events of the end time; he also directs them. Above all, he conducts the final judgment."

But Allison also knows that a cadre of scholars take a different view from him on this and so he retorts that "The maxim, familiar to critical scholars, that Jesus proclaimed not

himself but the kingdom, corresponds not to the Jesus tradition as we know it but only to that tradition after scholars have excised large portions of it.” As we already know, textual excision or emendation is expressly not allowed by Allison. We have the sources we have and so disbelieving the sources here (and Allison gives 26 examples of apophthegmata, prophetic sayings and parables from Q, Mark, M and L to support Jesus’ christological views):

“entails that, despite our primary sources being consistently wrong, we can nonetheless get it right. We can divine all the post-Easter contributions, toss them into the discard bucket, and discover that Jesus did not have an exalted self-conception. In other words, we can, through subtraction, prove a negative. Yet if the sources—all of them, and in abundance—mislead on this central subject, if the larger pattern is a false memory, how can anyone credibly exhume the truth beneath all the obfuscating additions?”

And this is really Dale Allison’s overarching argument in *Constructing Jesus*: believe it as it is or have nothing to believe. It’s as if it never occurred to him that the New Testament sources might have views of their own to share which they sincerely thought were true but which were historically dubious. Isn’t one of Allison’s own points on memory that strength of conviction does not equal accurate historical remembrance? Why then the reluctance to acknowledge and follow through on such a thing in practice? It smacks of a last desperate attempt to believe especially the synoptics as they are on his part. What unspoken forces are active in his hermeneutics here we can only speculate. However, perhaps we get a glimpse of it when he quotes fellow scholar, Barnabas Lindars:

"The apocalyptic notion of the agent of the divine intervention is the foundation of New Testament Christology... The most primitive Christology can thus be formulated as follows: Jesus is the man whom God has designated to perform the judgement and to usher in the everlasting kingdom of God's righteousness; as such he has been exalted to the throne at the right hand of God and declared to be the Messiah; he will soon be revealed, wickedness will be extirpated, and the righteous ... will enter the joy of the kingdom."...

Thus:

"The main thesis of the present chapter offers an explanation for both the great age of this Christology and its prevalence in our sources: Jesus himself already promoted a version of it, so it was there from the beginning."...

"Jesus did not envisage a 'brokerless kingdom'. Nor did he proclaim a 'kingless kingdom.' Rather, when he looked into the future, he saw thrones, including one for himself. What caused him to hold such a conviction is not subject to analysis. We can know only the fact, not the why."

Other interpreters, however, might take another view. On what basis can we say that we know this "fact"? On the basis of multiple texts from those who clearly believe it? How has Allison demonstrated in clear, historical terms that Jesus himself believed it? (And, we might add, in the way he believed it in distinction to others.) What work has he done to distinguish Jesus from his later, Christian worshippers? It seems like Allison has made no specific case for such a fact at all but has, instead, exemplified a generality of belief and then pinned it on Jesus. *Which is exactly what the New Testament does itself.* Here we

must doubt that Allison is even following his own rules yet alone those of others he disagrees with. This won't do at all. Here Allison is going against the grain of his own proposals from chapter one for is he not saying that the belief in the resurrection or the second coming has not shaped Christian views a generation after Jesus (at least) at all? Is he saying that the individuals and collectives responsible for the New Testament have not "transmuted memories into meaningful patterns" from their points of view? Is he saying that, admitting these two points, this doesn't change the story at all and that Jesus is directly in line with later Christian belief about him, that in perhaps 40 or 50 or 60 years no christological development took place in any way? (If Allison responds that of course it did then that answer commits him to explaining it in as much detail as he can.) This is taking the continuity theme of Allison's work to extremes. Allison's methods here are conspicuous by the fact that they are a way of maintaining traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus and with his express sanction to do so. Its not so much critical historical scholarship as playing with texts to get Christian beliefs from the mouth of Jesus.

Interesting here as an example of the multiple ideas that seem to be competing in his head as Allison writes *Constructing Jesus* is the argument of his fourth chapter which is that Jesus did more than speak aphorisms which may have been transmitted accurately. Allison conceives that speeches or, at least, connected collections of thoughts may have been preserved too. His example is Q 6:27-42 which he regards as all of a piece. He conceives of it in history like this:

"The text does not record anybody's personal memory of a single occasion; rather, it descends from somebody's generic memory, which was the product of multiple episodes.

Such generic memory later took the form of Christian discourses, which is what enabled others who had never heard Jesus to quote him. At some point, tradents were recalling not a performance of Jesus himself but someone else's performance in the name of Jesus."

We may fairly and rightly ask how Allison has come to this conclusion. Is it because it fits with the text as is, a concern we know that Allison has? Also, at what point would such a procedure become so dislocated from any originary speech as to be radically different or even at odds with it? Where, in other words, might we judge that Jesus gets lost in the pious repetition? At what point is "the gist" out of kilter with the specifics? For it seems to me here that we operate with two polar extremes. On the one hand we have words Jesus speaks on given occasions from his own mouth. On the other we have speeches given to Jesus and spoken in his name of things he didn't himself say. Somewhere in between these two are the speeches Allison refers to. But surely it matters to history which pole the gospel materials are nearer to and surely it makes a difference to our historical judgments of such documents how we judge said speeches?

What I'm saying here is that saying something is "the gist" of Jesus is not saying that it is Jesus or that Jesus indeed said what it is claimed he said. In fact, it seems more proper and appropriate to call such things *interpretations of (i.e. about) Jesus* than to say Jesus said them at all. "Jesus said" is not the same as "Jesus may have once said something a bit like this and this is my version of it after a lot of repetition of other people's versions of it." So here I think that Allison needs to ask himself how his views about memory and orally transmitted tradition line up with his view that the synoptics must be trusted for they do not seem entirely compatible to me. My suspicion is that they are being claimed to fit on the hoof.

In his fifth chapter Allison wishes to argue for the essential accuracy of the passion accounts of Jesus' death. He notes especially Crossan's views of these as "prophecy historicized" and grants that they are highly biblicalized narratives yet states:

"Although Crossan's analysis of the wide-ranging intertextuality of the passion traditions is largely persuasive, those traditions likely contain more memory than he supposes. The Qumran pesharim show us that ancient Jews could move from history to Scripture as well as from Scripture to history; and it requires no imagination but only knowledge of Matthew's use of Mark to grasp how almost effortlessly a scripturally learned mind can infuse inherited materials with biblical idioms and phrases."

He summarises that "to biblicalize is not necessarily to invent" which we must grant is true yet its not necessarily not to invent either, as Crossan largely imagines to be the case. We must also ask here why Allison is using the term "memory" of these events. Has he established in his analysis that it is memory instead of, say, invention or do we see here a *presumption* of gospel truth, a *predilection* to believe what they say is honest memory? Allison seems here to go with a version of "people in general would have known what happened" and so disputes Crossan's literary account of events on that basis. The implication seems to be that if its written down it must be memory which seems somewhat at odds again with his opening chapter and one wonders if he would be this generous of similarly ancient texts generally. Much seems assumed, not least an inherent choice to believe the gospels unless arguments to the contrary can be proven. What, we must ask, is the historical basis of this prejudice? Perhaps it is Pauline parallels to the synoptic recitation of events which he takes some pages to rehearse. Of these Allison asks:

"What should we make of these parallels? The answer depends partly on whether one finds the evidence for a pre-Markan passion narrative persuasive. Because I do-one reason being that I judge John to be mostly independent of the Synoptics-it becomes possible to entertain the notion that Paul, writing a decade or more before Mark, knew an early passion narrative, a relative or ancestor of what we find in Mark 14-16."

Allison also makes the claim, on the face of it bold, that "The story of Jesus in Gethsemane probably enjoyed wide circulation in the early churches." Here one wonders what is giving Allison confidence to say such a thing where he has been previously so keen to portray himself as full of sober doubt. The suspicion is that his doubt is a methodological cover behind which he hides but from behind which, occasionally, his true, New Testament trusting, self peeks out.

This is further evident in that Allison here wants to combat the skepticism apparent in modern debates, primarily exemplified by that of Crossan, but also that in the wider 20th century as well, primarily that of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann's view was that much of history was lost to us but Allison seems keen to be more optimistic. He unleashes a catalogue of 31 texts in defence of his view which I want to reproduce in full as an example of Allison's approach in *Constructing Jesus*:

1). Matt 10:38 // Luke 14:27 (Q); Mark 8:34; Gos. Thom. 55. Jesus purportedly enjoined his hearers to prepare for the possibility of martyrdom: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

2). Matt 10:39 // Luke 17:33 (Q); Mark 8:35; John 12:25. These verses also call for accepting martyrdom if or when it comes: "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it."

3). Mark 8:31-33; 9:31; 10:33-34. Jesus purportedly foresaw his fate, spoke of it, and acquiesced to it: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him" (cf. 2:20; 9:12; 12:6-8; 14:8, 27).

4). Mark 10:45. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

5). Mark 14:17-21. Jesus anticipated that one of his own followers would betray him: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me" (cf. John 13:21-30).

6). Mark 14:32-42. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus resigned himself to death: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

7). Mark 14:43-50. Jesus did not resist arrest: "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled" (cf. John 18:1-9).

8). Mark 14:53-65. Jesus did not defend himself before the Jewish authorities: "Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But he was silent and did not answer" (cf. John 18:13-24).

9). Mark 15:1-15. Jesus did not defend himself before Pilate: "Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed" (cf. John 18:28-19:16).

10). Matt 26:51-54. A disciple, drawing a sword to protect Jesus from those come to arrest him, was rebuked: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

11). Luke 13:31-33. "At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'""

12). Luke 23:6-12. Jesus did not defend himself before Herod: "He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer."

13). John 10:11-18. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I lay down my life for the sheep.... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in

order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

14). John 12:23-27. Jesus speaks about his death: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.... Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-`Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour."

15). John 15:12-13. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

16). John 16:5-10. "Now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, `Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.... I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer ."

17). John 18:10-12. When Peter draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the slave Malchus, Jesus commands him: "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

18). Rom 5:18-19. "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.""

19). Rom 15:1-3. "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, `The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'"

20). 1 Cor 11:23-26. "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, `This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, `This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (cf. Mark 14:22-25).

21). Gal 1:3-4. "The Lord Jesus Christ ... gave himself for our sins."

22). Gal 2:20. "The Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me."

23). Eph 5:2. "Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

24). Phil 2:7-8. Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (cf. Rom 5:18-21).

25). Several passages in Paul, according to some modern scholarship, refer to the faith or faithfulness of Jesus, among them Rom 3:22, 26; Gal 2:16; 2:20; 3:22; Phil 3:9.¹⁵⁵ If they are right, then it is relevant that the context of most of these verses has to do with the saving death of Jesus (Rom 3:21-26; Gal 2:15-21; Phil 3:7-11). In other words, Jesus' faithfulness is in large measure his obedient death on a cross.

26). 1 Tim 2:5-6. "Christ Jesus ... gave himself a ransom for all."

27). 1 Tim 6:12-13. This line probably takes up liturgical language that made Jesus a model of faithfulness in the face of death: "Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you. ..."

28). Titus 2:14. "He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity."

29). Heb 5:7-10. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience

through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek."

30). Heb 12:1-2. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

31). 1 Pet 2:20-24. "If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross."

Allison writes of this catalogue of texts that "These texts come from Q, Mark, M, L, John, Thomas, the authentic Paulines, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. They obviously reflect a very widespread belief: Jesus did not run from his death or otherwise resist it. On the contrary, anticipating his cruel end, he submitted to it, trusting that his unhappy fate was somehow for the good." But Allison also says that "what matters for my case is not the historicity of this or that item on my list but rather the list as a whole and the genesis of the traditional image, so widely attested." Allison attempts to smother us with a

hotch potch of texts and claim the generality as true. Is this a legitimate procedure? Are all these texts saying the same thing? Are they utterly compatible? What is their relation, one to another, historically? Does this not matter? Can none of them be inserted into other contexts which radically change their meaning? And what of this "genesis" of which Allison speaks? Has he historically described this or merely attempted to speak of the beginning from the end? What if historical analysis struck half or even most of these texts out? Would Allison's views then change? In short, how is this anything other than a choice to believe certain texts in a certain way as a prerequisite for Allison's conclusions? It seems to me that believing the New Testament and reading it a certain way is the only thing on show here for the history is, and has been, debated for centuries now with greatly differing results. So I'm at a loss to understand how this is a strictly historical procedure that makes a *historical* difference at all. When it comes to the passion narratives, the man of sober doubt has become the man of belief.

We come to Allison's last chapter where he seeks to round things up. He states that: "The previous chapters have mined the Jesus tradition for memory and not come up empty. I have urged that we are able, with a clear critical conscience, to establish a number of significant claims about Jesus." *This does not seem like the man of chapter one.* In fact, it starts to seem like Allison over-egged the pudding in chapter one so that, in the end, things turned out better than he hoped. He does, however, speak of "an unexamined assumption: the Synoptic evangelists were, for the most part, not writing creative fiction but rather reconfiguring traditions informed by the past" and in this chapter Allison argues that the synoptists "thought that they were reconfiguring memories of Jesus, not inventing theological tales." Yet he also speaks once more to his own loss of historical confidence in the material as separate items of tradition:

"I have lost my former confidence in anyone's ability, including my own, to trace with assurance the history of most of the traditions. I no longer presume that removing the literary wrapper to behold a historical event or saying of Jesus is a straightforward affair. Even when reminiscence lies within a text, that text is likely to have been consciously and unconsciously reworked before being written down. Our sources are complex artifacts, the collaboration of, among other things, fallible perceptions, imperfect memories, linguistic conventions, cultural assumptions, and personal and communal agendas. Differentiating an original event or saying from all that has mingled with it and been superimposed upon is often perhaps a bit like trying to separate streams after they have flowed into a river."

He is also willing to ask if we have understood the genre of the gospels correctly:

"Have we made a... mistake with the Gospels, failing to get their genre right? Have we taken them to be history of a sort or biography of a sort when they were never intended to be either? The question has force because the evangelists were, it appears, far more interested in the practical and theological meanings of their stories than in literal facticity. Moreover, some have recently decided that the guild has long misconstrued the genre of Acts, and that the book contains features more typical of light fiction than ancient historiography. Perhaps they are right, and perhaps light fiction is also the category into which we should place the Gospels. In recent years, several scholars have called attention to possible affiliations between the canonical Gospels and Hellenistic romance, or between the Gospels and Homer."

Yet Allison finds himself here stuck in a void of unknowing for he states that:

"My current judgment is...: notwithstanding all the efforts of modern scholarship, the majority of sayings-maybe the vast majority of sayings-the Synoptics attribute to Jesus are neither demonstrably of pre-Easter origin nor manifestly post-Easter inventions; they are instead best classified as "possibly authentic" or, if one prefers, "possibly not authentic." The same holds, I believe, for most of the stories that the Synoptics tell about Jesus."

But we must ask how historically interested Allison even is at all in the end for he finishes his main text with the following confession:

"If my deathbed finds me alert and not overly racked with pain, I will then be preoccupied with how I have witnessed and embodied faith, hope, and charity. I will not be fretting over the historicity of this or that part of the Bible."

Allison displays an interesting set of views overall, not, I'm convinced, in an entirely consistent or compatible way. But then I'm equally convinced that the consistency we each see in ourselves is part of a self-generated narrative in any case and so Allison should not be blamed for that. From outside, however, a telling comment Allison makes is the following:

"We cannot... open the case, check the facts, and quit telling falsehoods."

It seems that, in principle, Allison has lost hope in history (i.e. "the past") deciding what the facts are for us. Yet he does this whilst using other, supposedly historical, arguments to convince us that it can still guide us anyway. This is something of a Jekyll and Hyde approach and it goes hand in hand with what I regard as his inadequate historiographical

philosophy. For is it the case that history is a matter, simply, of “truth or falsehood”? Does Allison imagine that if we were there with Jesus in Galilee we would have all come up with the same answer about who he was, what he said and what it meant? Why is Jesus a risen Messiah who, in the apocalyptic visions of his followers, will return in glory (whether inspired by Jesus himself to think this or not) as opposed to a dead first century Jew who had a brief career wandering around Galilee in which he caused a bit of a stir, got on the wrong side of the wrong people and wound up crucified? Is this difference that, in the end, Allison’s valued texts give the first story and not the second? Certainly, in his final comments Allison seems to suggest that this story, regardless of history, is more valuable to him than others that historical study may offer as alternatives.

Here I find it staggering that throughout his book the notion of interpretation has apparently been so missing. There is no concept here of different takes on Jesus but only of one singular truth. History, it seems, is singular in its options as Allison practices it. Modern historical theorists, I’m sure, would not necessarily all agree. So, in the end, I’m not so concerned that Allison’s views differ from historical options that I would choose. What concerns me more is Allison’s notion that history is either right, which is one thing, or wrong, which is the many other alternatives. In this I fundamentally think that he gets not merely Jesus wrong but existence itself. Allison offers New Testament interpretation as fact. Nothing in his book convinces otherwise. This isn’t so much historical procedure as theological preference. So if its true, as Allison maintains, that “To do history is not to do theology” it seems equally true that to do theology is not to do history. My own view is that you’re always doing both when its about Jesus. What else could you do?

Yet I must finish my appraisal of Allison's work by returning to two key aspects of his approach. The first aspect I wish to focus on is his articulated and seemingly terminal disdain of tradition histories. I surmise that he regards these as at best contentious if not simply tendentious enterprises. Certainly, Allison argues throughout his book that pinning his belief on historically justified sayings or actions of Jesus is out of order even where they are his own. It is my suspicion that he takes such things to be interpretational (and so less than certain) rather than "facts" (which are much more so). But what then, I wonder, is the New Testament that Allison chooses to trust in comparison to this? Is it not also the product of tradition histories? Is it not also the result of the interpretive selections and beliefs of others, many of whom simply never met Jesus? If there is any notion in Allison's book that there is fact and there is interpretation and the New Testament is the former then I would flatly refute it. I don't really think Allison thinks that but it does leave very open the question of what exactly he does think it is. He wants us to trust its gist: but what exactly is he asking us to trust? Allison clearly says that he does not believe that "eyewitnesses or companions of eyewitnesses" wrote the canonical gospels, for example. So, again, what is he asking us to trust? The interpretational choices of unknown first century Christian believers whose reasons we cannot know? Why should we trust them over Thomasine believers or possible Q communities who, as far as we know, did not preserve an interest in a passion narrative or even regard the resurrection as important, even foundational, as those within the New Testament have? Why privilege their interpretations? Allison needs to tell us.

The second and final aspect I want to critique goes right back to one of the first points Allison makes about memory at the beginning of his book. This is that memory is not a tape; its reconstructive. It is all very well to state this methodologically but has Allison

followed this through practically in his study? I suggest not. Or, at least, if he has it seems that he has lapses and moments of positivity in which he forgets what he is claiming to hold true. We must plainly say here that the New Testament is itself, at best, reconstructive of history and it is indeed “not a tape”. This difference must be observed and methodologically maintained, however. The thing is, doing so, this then begs many of the questions that Allison wants us to ignore since he has instituted a ban on tradition histories, preferring the either/or of accepting the New Testament as it is or accepting, as the only alternative, that Jesus is lost to our historical gaze. Is then not the most important question in this context, one that Allison himself sets up, “How, then, is it reconstructive?” Allison has largely brushed over the redactional concerns of the New Testament writers in his book, however, preferring to argue that they only ever think anything because Jesus did first. A hurricane of texts to “prove” this is his preferred method of persuasion, a hammer to crack a nut. This doesn’t really wash because explaining what we have and how it came to be is actually the game that he is in. He can refuse to play that game but it is then for others to decide if he has convinced anyone of his proposals or not. But this may then lead us skeptics to ask why we should regard the New Testament as “memory” at all. How can we interpret successfully what is memory and what is not? Does Allison have any advice for us here or must we simply believe what got written down without further investigation?

It is my own view, to close this chapter of my own book, that, instead of “constructing Jesus”, Allison has actually given us all the tools we need for deconstructing Jesus. Based on his argument here one wonders why we should not throw up our hands, exclaim that we can know nothing and join Robert M. Price in writing books skeptical of any Jesus in our texts at all. If our choice is to believe some few texts and their

apocalyptic interpretational scheme or nothing then why is nothing any worse a choice? A historical case must be made for choosing the something of the New Testament instead but since Allison wants to severely restrict the ways we can do this, and will not allow us to make intracanonial choices about history or lack of it from tradition to tradition, it makes it difficult to choose anything else. And here we have to reckon with the theological consequences too. It is John Dominic Crossan who has argued that one problem with Allison's Jesus is that he is "wrong". By this he means that Jesus the apocalyptic prophet of the near future action of God has not returned. His prophecies and his christology, if that's what they were, were not right. Allison, thus, gets Jesus right at the expense of Jesus himself (and the whole New Testament) being profoundly wrong. This could, of course, be the truth. But one imagines it wouldn't be a very satisfying conclusion, not least for Allison himself.

11. Misremembering Jesus

James Dunn's *Jesus Remembered* is a large book, around 900 pages, and several hundred of these pages are not even discussing Jesus directly. Therefore, in my appraisal of the book here, it is strange to have to say that, in my view, it should probably have been longer. The reason for this view will hopefully become apparent in what follows but the short version is that Dunn seems to have discussed some things without fleshing out the issues concerned. He has noticed some phenomena thought pertinent to a historical enquiry into the history of Jesus, mentioned them but then summarily come to a conclusion, the suspicion being that this was what he had already decided to think anyway.

All this is related to how Dunn sets up his study and let me say from the off that I find Dunn's history of modern Jesus research and his methodological setup for the book of more interest for my purposes here than his historical results which, to be blunt, fall within an expected conservative spectrum of beliefs. Another way of saying this is that what Dunn finds important in creating such studies is more interesting than what he finds having done them. For Dunn this is a matter of faith, history and hermeneutics:

1). Faith: "By 'faith' I mean that dimension of the discussion formed by Christian belief in Jesus. The traditional terms of that belief have already been indicated in the formal language (and rather daunting conceptuality) of the classic creeds... But the term itself (faith) embraces any conviction that Jesus has provided 'a window into the divine' (almost a definition of an icon), and/or that in some sense his death achieved salvation from sin, and/or that he was raised by God from death to a life beyond death. The point is that such

faith inevitably influences and shapes any attempt on the part of one who stands within the Christian tradition (as I do) to make an evaluation of the historical figure. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, whether such a faith perspective should or can be bracketed out, or whether such faith can be sufficiently open to critique from without (and from within) are all questions which have bounced back and forth during the last few centuries and will form much of the grist for what follows."

2). History: "By 'history' I mean all that is involved in taking seriously the fact that, whatever else he was, Jesus was a figure in history, and, to that extent at least, is amenable to the methods and tools of historical study. What these methods and tools are, what are or should be the working assumptions behind their employment, and whether historical inquiry can or should try to escape completely from the pre-conditioning of some ideology ('faith' or other), these too are questions which form part of the daily diet for protagonists on our theme and must feature prominently in what follows. Here it should simply be noted that the fact of faith, belief regarding Jesus, however expressed, is itself a historical datum, one which has itself to be taken into consideration in any historical account of Christianity's beginnings, even when a particular historical method may attempt to bracket out a faith perspective from the assumptions lying behind that method."

3). Hermeneutics: "By 'hermeneutics' I mean the theory of interpretation, and by extension the science, or perhaps better, art of interpreting the data available to us regarding the historical figure of Jesus. The data in question have consisted primarily of the testimony of the NT writings, particularly the Gospels, including, of course, their own faith claims. The wish that there could be other sources has often been expressed, and a significant body of contemporary opinion would claim that that wish has been fulfilled through the discovery

of more documents from the earliest centuries CE during the last fifty or so years. This claim too will be a matter for further discussion. But whatever the extent of the database, the task of interpreting it remains. The hermeneutical task itself has been seen to have many facets in recent years. But the principal concern for the present historical study will be what might be called the hermeneutical dialogue between faith and history. Hermeneutics, I suggest, provides a kind of bridge between faith and history. Whether that is in fact the case, whether it can be sustained as such a bridge, and whether, if so, the bridge will be sustainable only in a lopsided way, firmly rooted on one side but with only a shallow hold on the other, are once again questions which lie behind and motivate all that follows."

The focus on these three things remains the focus throughout the opening section of Dunn's book and their interrelation is important for understanding his procedures. Here, in what becomes an analysis of past historical study over the preceding 200 years or so, he seems concerned mainly to point out bogeymen in the recent past but also champions which point to the type of attitude towards the historical study of Jesus he thinks we should have. Dunn describes that which some in the past have called "quests for the historical Jesus" in two chapters, one detailing a "flight from dogma" evident in past researches and a second Dunn regards as detailing a "flight from history" in the same.

Dunn regards the onset of a desire for "scientific history," which we may loosely align with the remarks about the gospels given by Hermann Samuel Reimarus and what follows in the early 19th century studies of Jesus, as the beginning of historical study's flight from dogma, by which, of course, is meant religious dogma. Such dogma would have included a naive belief that the gospels of the New Testament and the Jesus of

history were simply to be uncritically equated. Reimarus, as Dunn reports correctly, wasn't having this. Reimarus wanted to know what the differences were between a historically configured Jesus and what revered books said about him. And Reimarus thought there would be a difference. In a similar vein, by the end of the 18th and into the 19th century, the academic environment, which no less affected those whose academic work was with biblical texts, was affected by an Enlightenment distaste with miracles or supposed revelation. Hence David Friedrich Strauss, with his application of "myth" to the gospels as a way to explain much of them, also enters the flight from religious dogma in historical Jesus study. This was, in general, a period in historical Jesus research which, through a focus on what we may call (not without its problems) "objective history," did much work on the sources of the gospels and their relationships to one another, producing notable (and lasting) documentary hypotheses such as that Mark was, historically, the first written gospel. The historical configurations of Jesus that were produced, however, were liberal and generalised, teachers of timeless morality, and this was a problem.

Fortunately (in Dunn's retelling anyway), three figures arose at the end of the 19th century who put a block on what Dunn has referred to here as the "Liberal Quest". The first two were Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. They championed an apocalyptic Jesus which was thought more historical because his motivation was at least placed in the first century CE amongst people of Jewish origin as opposed to the generalised moralistic teacher that could have come from any time and place that numerous scholars were putting forward in the 19th century. But there was another figure, Martin Kähler, who also spoke towards the end of the 19th century who had a different point to make and Dunn, in *Jesus Remembered*, is much enamoured of what he had to say:

"The more effective block on the Liberal quest was the surprising re-emergence of faith as a factor which could not be ignored, the sobering realization that a historical inquiry into the life of Jesus had after all to take account of faith. After giving way to the claims of history for so long, faith at last bit back!"...

"Kähler's central claim, then, is that the Christ of the Bible is Jesus seen in his significance. For Kähler there is no such thing in the Bible as 'the historical Jesus', a figure devoid of significance (hence 'So-called Historical Jesus')."

"the Gospels' picture of Jesus is impregnated with interpretation throughout. It simply is not possible to get back from the Gospels to a Jesus who may or may not have been significant."

It is important to note here that this will basically be the kernel of Dunn's entire thesis and it begins with this interest in what Kähler had to say (in his most famous work *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*). This "interpreted Jesus," this Jesus of faith that Kähler thought was the only one to be found in the New Testament, is the one that, later in the book, Dunn will crown "the remembered Jesus". However, in the immediate context of his book, Dunn goes on from his noting of Kähler's remarks to William Wrede who, especially in a book about Mark's gospel which regards it as Mark's pious fiction (*The Messianic Secret*), calls the gospels faith documents and so designates them unhistorical accounts which, as Dunn sees things, stops liberal enquiries into the Jesus of history for most of the twentieth century. (Wrede was writing in 1901.) Dunn also tacks on to his discussions of the "flight from dogma" here sociological enquiries such as those of Gerd Theissen and Richard Horsley in the last third of the 20th century

and majors on “neo-liberal” enquiries towards the end of that century as well, especially those of Robert Funk, formerly the chair and lead instigator of the Jesus Seminar who were prominent especially in the 1990s (i.e. just before Dunn published his book in 2003). The focus on Funk is both understandable and yet not fully justifiable in that Funk was far more effective in leading the Jesus Seminar than his own studies were particularly popular or incisive or comprehensive. When we consider that the Seminar also included John Dominic Crossan, Burton Mack and Marcus Borg, all more popular than Funk as individual writers on Jesus, and all doing arguably much more thorough historical work than Funk did (Funk’s one major book on the subject was the summary *Honest to Jesus* whereas the three others mentioned wrote several), one wonders if Dunn has not gone for the easier target there.

But we move on and next Dunn wants to detail for us not only a “flight from dogma” but also a “flight from history”. The problem depicted here, remembering the three factors Dunn finds relevant to any enquiry (faith, history and hermeneutics!), is that “pure” history was seen, historically, as a challenge to faith as we can imagine to be the case if new studies come out which decry revelation and regard miracles as impossibilities. Such studies erode the possibilities for faith to remain unchanged and this can only be disturbing. The question then becomes how faith can remain where history claims ever more of the rights to Jesus for itself. Enter Kähler again, from the same source, as Dunn’s champion:

"More effective and of more lasting influence was the contribution of Kähler. He took the challenge of historical criticism more seriously, and instead of ducking the challenge he accepted it in full. 'We do not possess any sources for a "Life of Jesus" which a historian can

accept as reliable and adequate'. Historical scholarship leaves us with 'mere probabilities'. The sources contain nothing capable of sustaining a biography of Jesus... the effective assumption in life of Jesus research had been that faith must rest on the historical Jesus, that is, on Jesus insofar as he could be uncovered and reconstructed by historical-critical research. But the multiplicity of different reconstructions only made faith harder and not easier. More to the point, only a few scholars have the specialist training to carry through such reconstruction. Is faith, then, to depend on the findings of a few scholars? Are critical historians to become the new priests and pope of Christian faith? No! To tie faith to the historical accuracy of this or that detail would wholly undermine faith. Faith looks only to the historic Christ, the biblical Christ, 'the Christ who is preached'. 'The biblical Christ is the "invulnerable area" from which faith can gain its certainty without relying on the heteronomous guarantees of external authorities'."

So Kähler protests against faith becoming dependent on historical reconstruction as if there could be a new, purely historical, gospel. Instead, the "biblical Christ" is proclaimed as the object of faith. The question for us here is how Dunn will use this to create a figure with both historical and faith credibility (for this is what he wants). In historical context, however, Dunn notes that this view of Kähler's leads into and anticipates those of New Testament scholar and theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, perhaps the major figure in 20th century New Testament scholarship. Bultmann's view was that "I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist" (from his *Jesus and the Word*). Bultmann's own work was carried out mainly in the first half of the century whilst his influence, not least through the work of his doctoral students, was felt throughout the

second half in what Dunn designates a "second quest". This quest, which centred on methodological ways out of the negative formulation of Bultmann's just given, and which followed on from his practice of "Form Criticism," a practice which chopped up the gospels into their supposed traditional parts as free floating pericopes and then speculated on their individual histories, was largely based in finding criteria in which scholars could claim (rhetorically or otherwise) to have hit some kind of solid ground regarding the Jesus of history. Thus, criteria such as "dissimilarity" or "coherence" or "embarrassment" or "multiple attestation" or "plausibility" or "Aramaisms" or "Greek-speaking Jesus" were invented and refined.

Dunn, however, is not too enamoured of criteria such as these in historical Jesus research which, I imagine, is why he discusses them as a "flight from history." He says:

"Few, however, are wholly satisfied with these criteria. If the criterion of dissimilarity is applied consistently, and only that material is added which coheres with the limited findings of the first trawl through the Jesus tradition, then the historical Jesus who emerges is bound to be a strange creature, with anything which links him to the religion of his people or to the teaching of his followers automatically ruled out of court, 'a unique Jesus in a vacuum'. Besides, as Morna Hooker pertinently asked, do we know enough about either the Judaism of Jesus' time or earliest Christianity for the criterion to be applied with any confidence? Or as Lee Keck wisely observes: 'Instead of the distinctive Jesus we ought rather to seek the characteristic Jesus'. The criterion of coherence may simply reinforce an imbalanced core and bracket out incoherencies typical of real life. Multiple attestation may be of little more help, since, conceivably, the variations between, say Mark and Q, go back to a common post-Easter source. Alternatively, the identification of several other sources

may seem at first to boost the importance of this criterion (Crossan), but the tendentiousness of the claims involved simply produces a fresh spatter of question marks against the results obtained. The criterion of Aramaisms is similarly problematic, in that the criterion of itself cannot distinguish between an Aramaic-speaking Jesus and an Aramaic-speaking church. The criterion of embarrassment runs the same gauntlet as the criterion of dissimilarity: should the relatively few embarrassing sayings be regarded as any more characteristic of Jesus or as any more capable of catching the essence of Jesus' proclamation than dissimilar sayings? Theissen's criterion of historical plausibility is more a restatement of historical method than a criterion. And Porter's criteria depend on the highly disputed argument that Jesus used Greek (he finds seven instances) and on being able clearly to determine that a discourse was given in toto by Jesus rather than composed out of earlier Jesus tradition."

Here Dunn outlines the basic problems with criteria well and is seen to be largely in accordance with Dale Allison as discussed in my previous chapter. What, then, is to be done about the flight from history which Dunn cannot accept since he requires a Jesus neither inimical to faith yet also plausibly historical? Enter the "third quest":

"In the closing decades of the twentieth century the most hopeful advance in life of Jesus research was the recognition that the quest must primarily have in view Jesus the Jew and a clearer and firmer grasp of the consequences. What distinguishes this 'third quest of the historical Jesus' is the conviction that any attempt to build up a historical picture of Jesus of Nazareth should and must begin from the fact that he was a first-century Jew operating in a first-century milieu. After all, when so much is historically uncertain, we can surely assume with confidence that Jesus was brought up as a religious Jew. There is no dispute that his

mission was carried out within the land of Israel. And his execution on the charge of being a messianic pretender ('king of the Jews') is generally reckoned to be part of the bedrock data in the Gospel tradition. What more natural, one might think, what more inevitable than to pursue a quest of the historical Jesus the Jew?"

In this research program Dunn finds all the problems of the flights from both dogma and history resolved: Jesus the Jew is both credibly historical and also useful for faith. This research program is one which can claim historical and religious credibility in distinction either to those who would claim nothing can be known or who, instead, might find generalised teachers of morality. The conviction of this type of quest is that historical things can be known about Jesus and they are also something to do with the claims of the New Testament, both matters of history and faith. Dunn remarks that "Such an objective seems very obvious, but it is one which generations of scholarship seem to have resisted."

But it is exactly at this point in his enquiry that Dunn locates a bump in the road. He calls it "postmodernism":

"Postmodernism is the outworking in the humanities and particularly in literary criticism (from the 1970s) of this new appreciation of the relativity of all things and processes. In the discipline of history it has resulted in the abandonment not only of the idea of strictly objective knowledge, of 'facts' independent of interpretation, but also of the concept of linear time and so also of a single unified historical development or, in a word, of a 'grand narrative'. In the 'linguistic turn' of postmodernism, history has been reclaimed from the patronage of the sciences and restored to its ancient place as literature, but with the old

distinctions between fact and fiction, history and poetry now again blurred, and the assumption that historical texts refer to a reality outside of themselves called into question. The main impact of postmodernism, however, has been to call into question the traditional hegemony of the author, to liberate the meaning of texts from their originating context, and to bring the reader to centre-stage in the hermeneutical process."

Here Dunn implicates words of my own former teacher, Stephen Moore,³⁶⁴ ("Prior to the interpretive act, there is nothing definitive in the text to be discovered") as he goes on to say that "Postmodernism questions not only the objectivity of a text's meaning but the objectivity of meaning itself" and he seems to regard this as "loss of confidence in historical method in postmodern circles". But here I think Dunn simply gives an inaccurate reading of the consequences of postmodern readings of texts in general which, to be broad brush about it, emphasise meaning and ideology over matters of "confidence". Put simply, in postmodern readings there is NO non-ideological reading, little innocence and a requirement of taking responsibility for how you read and write. (In truth, such readings may regard reading as a kind of writing.) The work of Moore generally or the book *The Postmodern Bible*,³⁶⁵ both things from which he quotes indicating he is aware of them, should have taught him this much alone. We can only say that such a description hints at Dunn's own desire to believe that "historical method" can deliver something in which he feels (he?) we could have confidence, suggesting that what Dunn himself wants is both a kind of objective (here denoting non-ideological) history and a feeling of confidence about it. Both of these things tend in a philosophically realist, positivist direction as I argued was common in historical Jesus

364 When I was taught personally by Moore his interests had been literary and poststructuralist but were becoming postcolonial, ideological and concerned with "divine male bodies". His concerns seemed to me to always be to reveal what the Bible was saying without realising it was saying it.

365 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (Yale University Press, 1995). Stephen Moore was also an editor of this book and one of the collective.

research at the very beginning of my enquiries in *The Posthistorical Jesus*, describing such researches in general as a “Realist Quest”. Here Dunn begins to hint that he may be part of such a quest.

All this covers the first five chapters of Dunn’s book and the sixth chapter, in which the relationship of history, hermeneutics and faith are delineated, becomes key for me in understanding what Dunn is about here. In this chapter Dunn is keen to resolve problems and tie up loose ends such as that “A faith which regards all critical scrutiny of its historical roots as inimical to faith can never hold up its head or lift up its voice in any public forum.” Rather than faith going home with its tail between its legs, Dunn would rather make faith once again historically respectable as one example of the agenda here. In general, Dunn wants to make clear what his views on history and faith are and what they are for him describing. He also wants to elucidate how, for him, “hermeneutics” helps here to serve the causes of both history and faith. He begins with history following British historian, R.G. Collingwood:

“The historical ‘event’ belongs to the irretrievable past. All the historian has available are the ‘data’ which have come down through history — personal diaries, reminiscences of eyewitnesses, reports constructed from people who were present, perhaps some archaeological artefacts, as well as circumstantial data about climate, commercial practice, and laws of the time, and so forth. From these the historian attempts to reconstruct the ‘facts’. The facts are not to be identified as data; they are always an interpretation of the data. Nor should the fact be identified with the event itself, though it will always be in some degree of approximation to the event. Where the data are abundant and consistent, the responsible historian may be confident of achieving a reasonably close approximation.

Where they are much more fragmentary and often inconsistent, confidence of achieving a close approximation is bound to be much less. It is for this reason that the critical scholar learns to make carefully graded judgments which reflect the quality of the data — almost certain (never simply 'certain'), very probable, probable, likely, possible, and so on. In historical scholarship the judgment 'probable' is a very positive verdict."

Dunn notes that this kind of history could be a problem for faith though which has traditionally been thought of as a kind of certainty, a kind which historical enquiry is not. Yet Dunn demurs:

"It was the Enlightenment assumption that necessary truths of reason are like mathematical axioms, and that what is in view is the certain QED of mathematical proof, which has skewed the whole discussion. But faith moves in a totally different realm from mathematics. The language of faith uses words like 'confidence' and 'assurance' rather than 'certainty'. Faith deals in trust, not in mathematical calculations, nor in a 'science' which methodically doubts everything which can be doubted. Nor is it to be defined simply as 'assent to propositions as true' (Newman). Walking 'by faith' is different from walking 'by sight' (2 Cor. 5.7). Faith is commitment, not just conviction. Faith as trust is never invulnerable to questions."

Dunn, of course, wants people to be able to do history and to be able to have faith so "It is possible for the historian to enter empathetically into the faith experience of the first followers of Jesus even when the historian does not share that particular faith. That is why the quest of the historical Jesus is not simply a matter of faith looking for its mirror-image or confirmation in the past." Yet he warns about "objectivity":

"historicism (historical positivism) could think in terms of 'brute facts' in abstraction from interpretation. But the facts that matter in history, the facts that carry history forward, are never 'bare facts', empty of significance. Facts, other than the merely ephemeral, are always experienced as significant, facts-in-their-significance, a 'fact' ignored by questers who, desirous of academic respectability for their work, continue to appeal to the Enlightenment paradigm of scientific objectivity."

Dunn's way out of this is to plump for "critical realism" (after Ben Meyer and, as we shall later see in this book, N.T. [Tom] Wright) as his epistemological position. This, he seems to feel, allows him to talk about "the viability of stable bodies of knowledge that can be communicated, built upon, and subjected to testing" and, in a confessional moment, he says "the model of historical study as a *dialogue* between present and past, between historian and history, is one which has always appealed to me, not least because it recognizes that the historian not only asks the questions, but, in genuine engagement with the subject matter, often finds him/herself put in question." Critical realism in general is an epistemology which attempts to maintain an awareness of interpretational factors and a human being's own inevitable involvement in enquiry whilst also seeking to maintain that there is something "real" or outside the self or genuine to know. In Tom Wright's explanation of this he gives a much fuller description (in general, historical, literary and theological categories to boot) in a completely separate volume to his main Jesus book. Here I think Dunn is far too brief in his description and its possible implication for his study. One gets the impression (or, at least, I did) that Dunn may not have yet wrestled enough with the implications and consequences of such thinking.

This is exemplified when Dunn trips himself up and falls down a rabbit hole of his own making by lumbering into a trap labelled “translation”. He points out that the New Testament was written Greek, not English (or presumably any other modern language), and so:

“in order that they may be conveyors of any meaning these ancient Greek words need to be read within the context of the language usage of the time. Historical philology is still essential and unavoidable. It inevitably follows that the Greek text (even in its modern, eclectic form) is normative in regard to any and every translation; unless the Greek text is recognized as determining and limiting the range and diversity of translation, then the translation loses its claim to legitimacy as a translation.”

Many thoughts follow hot on the heels of this declaration, not least of which are these two:

- 1). We have no autograph of any New Testament text.
- 2). The overwhelming majority of New Testament readers read it in their own language and could do no other.

So we need to ask if Dunn is suggesting we require a new priesthood of scholars to mediate such study here? Elsewhere in his historical recitation he has been dead against this. For Dunn, the issues lie elsewhere, however: “there are such things as bad, or even (dare one say it?) *wrong* translations.” Here Dunn reveals a certain vulnerability in the face of the “postmodernism” he has previously decided to mention:

"Presumably postmodern teachers of ancient languages and texts do not dissent from this, and postmodern examiners of such translations mark them down like any other teacher. In the case of readings of the NT, the normativity of the Greek text implies that there can be bad readings, 'bad' because they are based on poor translations. Put another way, it is simply important to recognize the character of historical texts as historical texts. For the Greek text read as a historical text (interpretations as well as translations taking account of accident, syntax, and idiom of the day) inevitably functions as a norm for legitimacy of modern readings too. Without that basic recognition, the particular text becomes no more than a lump of potter's clay, vulnerable to being shaped entirely by the whim of the interpreter (potter). In other words, the very identity of the text is at stake, and historical study and scholarly method are unavoidable if the NT and the Gospels are to be read at all."

The issue here, of course, is Dunn's rhetorical imposition of a "normativity" and in that he has not explained how a Greek New Testament text made of Greek language is any less subject to postmodern (or any other) observations about language (or history or interpretation) in general than any other. Dunn claims to know that "there is no translation without interpretation" yet he adds that:

"the original-language text is what is to be translated/interpreted, and... each translation has to justify itself as a translation of that text. The historical text cannot determine the exact translation, but unless the text functions as some kind of norm for the translation, unless it is seen to provide a limiting factor on the diversity of acceptable translations, then translation itself becomes irresponsible."

One here has an instinct that there is something not quite named that Dunn fears. Who, one might ask, has not regarded the best critical editions of the Greek text of the New Testament that we have as their historical texts? Dunn names no names. He simultaneously argues for a normativity and for a controlling text yet also acknowledges this seeming impossibility since Greek words and language cannot limit their translation anymore than those in any other language can. This then leads into a discussion of what “rights” the text might have and he compares them to the rights of a child:

“As the rights of a child include the right to know its parentage and place of origin, so the rights of a text include the right to its own identity as determined by its composer or by the process which resulted in its enduring text form. Here again there are obvious qualifications to be registered. Some texts, particularly proverbs and aphorisms, were never limited to a particular context and their enduring value is independent of a specific context of usage. But others, like the letters of Paul, were clearly written in particular historical contexts and with particular historical circumstances in view. Any reading which disregards or discounts what evidence we have of these contexts and these circumstances is more than likely to misread the text.”

Here one questions what a “misreading” might be and one struggles to see it as anything other than one Dunn himself would not feasibly regard as “historical”. In short, Dunn has revealed himself to be fixated with his own spectrum of historical readings of the text and these are his markers of hermeneutical legitimacy and normativity. But as Dunn’s own, and as things which will surely differ from enquirer to enquirer, I fail to understand how Dunn has thereby made *the text* “normative” for anything at all. It seems nothing other than an argument for reading texts his way, or, at least, in a way that some

appropriately sanctioned guild of scholars reads them. What he hasn't done is said why I should read them his way as opposed to Crossan's or Allison's or Stephen Patterson's. Presumably they would argue equally for their own historical understandings of texts too. So all Dunn has actually done is reveal exactly what "postmodern" hermeneutics does too: that texts may always be read multiple ways. *Saying the text is "normative" changes nothing for who thinks otherwise? Who, in interpreting texts, doesn't think they are interpreting the text?*

Yet Dunn keeps digging and goes on to "the plain meaning of the text." This, thinks Dunn, has "priority". Here Dunn says

*"my concern is to emphasize that the precedence accorded to the text has to include the primary task of listening to the text, the goal of letting it speak so far as possible **in its own terms**. Some concept of 'plain meaning' has to be granted if the text is to be properly respected and if there is to be a genuine hermeneutical dialogue between text and reader."*
(emphasis mine)

Here Dunn engages "postmodernism" again, clearly imagining that it threatens what he wants to hold sway:

"It is true that postmodernism has put a question mark against the meaning of 'meaning' itself, or, to be more precise, against the idea of stability of meaning or of specific meaning being effectively communicated from (or through) text to reader. But the very concept of effective communication, on the basis of which the overwhelming majority of lectures and speeches are delivered, books and letters written, depends on the assumption that words

and sentences constructed with a view to communicate an intention can usually hope for a large measure of success in so communicating. Despite theorists denying the referentiality of texts outside of themselves, nowhere have practising historians given up the belief that language refers to reality; texts are still viewed as vehicles for communication of consciously held ideas."

He further opines that "without the conviction that at least the main point and thrust of what we wish to communicate is in fact communicated, no communication could hope to rise above the first stumbling phrases of someone trying to speak in a new foreign language."

Here, again, all sorts of thoughts abound. Is Dunn's believing he understands a text in its "plain sense" proof that he has so understood it? Has a belief in "plain sense" suddenly put away all observations about language in general, whether from "postmodern" critics or anyone else? Dunn speaks about being able to have trust regarding, or confidence in, something. All the "problems" he mentions are things which he seems to perceive might threaten such confidence. Yet he never remotely threatens to engage the theoretical issues or their consequences. It's a debate held on his terms according to his rules addressing the problems to his way of wanting to see things. Thus, "the hermeneutical principle of plain meaning in historical context as the primary reading or first goal in interpretation still stands." Once more, Dunn ignores a key aspect of postmodern readings of texts: that there is no non-ideological reading. That "plain sense" might be implicated in this is simply never acknowledged or discussed. That Dunn uses the language of "our reconstruction" and "interpretation" to do this seems witness to a gaping blind spot in Dunn's analysis here. He simply states that "the normativity of the

historical text in historical context should be acknowledged.” This begs ALL the questions and not simply postmodern ones.

At this point, in my view unadvisedly, Dunn uses an analogy of a plant being uprooted and replanted. He says “To uproot the plant and attempt to transpose it into a different bed without regard to its rootedness is likely to kill it.” He explains that:

“A historical text is like such a plant. The plain 'meaning' cannot be fully read off the text without regard to its rootedness in its originating context. The reference is not only to the situation/social context of writer and first readers/auditors, but also to the overtones that the words and phrases and idioms would have carried in these contexts (the root tendrils) and to the allusions and echoes, intended but also unintended, which the language of the text would have conveyed when it enacted the purpose for which it was written.”

But this gives me pause. Don't plants get repotted or replanted all the time from one soil to another... and with no apparent harm to the plant? What will kill the plant is damaging the root system which does not allow the plant to connect to its surroundings (whatever they are) and so gain nourishment from its new location. The specific soil is irrelevant to the plant. In fact, it is oblivious to what that is and will live anywhere provided that its root system is intact and there are nutrients it can feed on. Far from Dunn's analogy working for him it seems far better suited to those interpreters he might consider the purveyors of exotic and fashionable (postmodern) truths. For repotting and replanting are eminently possible and carried out daily even by relative amateurs. Just, in fact, as New Testament texts are read and interpreted daily by all levels of readers too. It seems that by “plain meaning” Dunn actually means something else, something

controlling, normative, "historical" - but only within his terms. Dunn's plant MUST be kept in its original soil at all times. His view is not that plants can't be replanted but that they SHOULDN'T be. Here, then, is something else that Dunn has not grasped in his reading the books of Stephen Moore and of "postmodernism" more generally: the consequences of the superfluity of meaning which postmodern readings of texts take as axiomatic.

Now Dunn moves to his hermeneutical theory and starts a discussion of various "hermeneutical circles". Once again, however, postmodernism is brought into it (one wonders why Dunn has kept doing this when it only seems to bring him trouble) and he offers us this muddled paragraph:

"The most vicious form of the hermeneutical circle, however, has proved to be that between reader and text as it has been developed within postmodern literary criticism. Indeed, deconstructionist hermeneutics attempt in effect to undermine the whole procedure envisaged in the hermeneutical circle by suggesting that the reality is an infinite series of interlocking circles, where the search for meaning is never ending and the play between signifier and signified goes on ad infinitum. The image conjured up is of a computer game without an end, or of an internet search into the infinity of cyberspace as web pages direct to other web pages in an endless sequence, or indeed of a computer hacker who has succeeded in so overloading a system that it crashes, or perhaps again of an academic colleague who always insists on the impossibility of any effective discussion of an academic subject or political policy without first resolving the problem of what human consciousness is. Intellectually challenging as such exercises are, they do not much assist in the living of life, the advance of knowledge, or the building of community. To conceive the hermeneutical process as an infinitely regressive intertextuality is a counsel of despair

which quickly reduces all meaningful communication to impossibility and all communication to a game of 'trivial pursuit'."

Dunn mentions "deconstructionist hermeneutics" here but he never, not once, mentions the name most attached to such a thing: Jacques Derrida. Derrida was notable for thinking not that people practiced "deconstructionist hermeneutics" but that things (and/as language) *deconstruct themselves*, that "deconstruction" is part of our linguistic context as language users. He was not known for thinking that "communication is impossible" neither can I think of any deconstructionist thinker who does. (And Dunn, tellingly, mentions none either. We can rightly count his silence as deconstructing his own argument here.) Here Dunn flails around at targets I suspect he little understands or wishes to engage with and this is ironic when he is arguing that texts should be engaged with historically on their own terms in their "plain sense"! Dunn's paradigm of "the advance of knowledge" would be much critiqued by such "deconstructionist" approaches, however. (Did not Kuhn already do this with his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* anyway?) Here again, Dunn does not so much engage and critique as cast a glance only to dismiss that upon which his disinterested and perfunctory gaze temporarily falls. Dunn is here a boxer who looks at his opponent in the opposite corner with little interest and decides not even to get up off of his stool, let alone throw any punches. "The meaning intended by means of and through the text is still a legitimate and viable goal for the NT exegete and interpreter" is not an argument that has been argued for against reasoned oppositional premises or beliefs but is simply a presuppositional dogma that continues to be held in the face of opposing views not really engaged at all. And its not a very sophisticated dogma either.

Another interesting aspect of Dunn's hermeneutical concerns is his asking the question of to what "historical Jesus" refers. He has so far, in his own mind at least, discussed "the hermeneutical tension between faith and history" but now this specific question confronts us. Dunn is clear that for all such a thing is "*the Jesus constructed by historical research*" yet he perceives problems here such as people too naively assuming this figure's equation with either "the real Jesus" or "Jesus as he was in Galilee," for example. But Dunn here objects:

*"the 'historical Jesus' is properly speaking a nineteenth- and twentieth-century construction using the data provided by the Synoptic tradition, **not** Jesus back then and **not** a figure in history whom we can realistically use to critique the portrayal of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition."* (emphasis original)

Kähler, once more, is Dunn's champion in this matter. Dunn states:

"The idea that a Jesus reconstructed from the Gospel traditions (the so-called 'historical Jesus'), yet significantly different from the Jesus of the Gospels, is the Jesus who taught in Galilee (the historical Jesus!) is an illusion. The idea that we can see through the faith perspective of the NT writings to a Jesus who did not inspire faith or who inspired faith in a different way is an illusion. There is no such Jesus. That there was a Jesus who did inspire the faith which in due course found expression in the Gospels is not in question. But that we can somehow hope to strip out the theological impact which he actually made on his disciples, to uncover a different Jesus (the real Jesus!), is at best fanciful. It is not simply that 'we reach Jesus only through the picture his disciples made of him', it is also that the only Jesus we reach through that picture is the Jesus who inspired that picture."

So Dunn's view, in line with this aspect of Kähler's thinking, is that the only Jesus you can recover from the faith documents that are our major sources for him (Dunn has already dropped large hints that these are basically the synoptic gospels in terms of history) is the Jesus they present. In Dunn's view it is not so much illegitimate to turn these documents upon themselves to construct another Jesus: it is impossible. So:

"we simply do not have portrayals of Jesus as seen through the eyes of the high priests or the Roman authorities or the people of the land. We do not have a 'neutral' (!) portrayal of Jesus. All we have in the NT Gospels is Jesus seen with the eye of faith. We do not have a 'historical Jesus', only the 'historic Christ'."

Dunn, with this suggestion, seems to confuse different Jesuses with an "objective" Jesus when he says "the distinctiveness of the 'objective Jesus' is largely the creation of the historical critic" but the main point is clear: Dunn thinks any other Jesus found in faith documents but the one that inspires faith (and, one imagines, a very historically particular sort of faith) to be unhistorical and inappropriate.

Dunn develops this into a historical argument for the validity of gospel testimony (as he will later discussing sources and especially oral memory and oral tradition). So he says:

"There is in fact no gap to be bridged between a Jesus historically conceived and the subsequent tradition which has effected consciousness; all we have is disciples effected by Jesus and the disciples thus 'effected' expressing their 'effection' by formulating the tradition which effects. The traditions which lie behind the Gospels (for the moment we will leave aside the question of what proportion of these traditions) began from the various

encounters between Jesus and those who by virtue of these encounters became disciples. The earliest traditions are the product of disciple-response. There is not an objectified meaning to be uncovered by stripping away the accretions of disciple faith. The tradition itself in its earliest form is in a crucially important sense the creation of faith; or to be more precise, it is the product of the encounters between Jesus and the ones who became his disciples. The hearing and witnessing of the first disciples was already a hermeneutical act, already caught in the hermeneutical circle. The twenty-first-century exegetes and interpreters do not begin the hermeneutical dialogue; they continue a dialogue which began in the initial formation of the tradition."

Here "effection" and "effected" are not mis-spellings but Dunn's chosen terms and thus:

"The point for us now, therefore, is that the saying or account attests the impact made by Jesus. But that does not enable us to get behind that impact to a Jesus who might have been heard otherwise. For the original impulse behind these records was, to put the point more accurately, sayings of Jesus as heard and received, and actions of Jesus as witnessed and retained in the memory, both parts of each phrase being important). We have to add in both cases, and as reflected on thereafter, of course. However, what we have in these traditions is not just the end-product of that reflection. It is rather the faith-creating word/event, as itself a force shaping faith and as retained and rehearsed by the faith thus created and being created. In other words, the Jesus tradition gives immediate access not to a dispassionately recorded word or deed, nor only to the end product (the faith of the 50s, 60s, 70s, or 80s), but also to the process between the two, to the tradition which began with the initial impact of Jesus' word or deed and which continued to influence intermediate retellers of the tradition until crystallized in Mark's or Matthew's or Luke's

account. In short, we must take seriously the character of the tradition as disciple-response, and the depth of the tradition as well as its final form."

And so here, in this formulation, we get to Dunn's conception of things and to the justification for the title of his book:

"We can therefore press Kähler's point still further to one of fundamental principle. The Synoptic tradition provides evidence not so much for what Jesus did or said in itself, but for what Jesus was remembered as doing or saying by his first disciples, or as we might say, for the impact of what he did and said on his first disciples. Bearing in mind the point just made, we may say that it is precisely the process of 'remembering' which fuses the horizons of past and present, by making the past present again (Vergegenwärtigung). What we actually have in the earliest retellings of what is now the Synoptic tradition, then, are the memories of the first disciples — not Jesus himself, but the remembered Jesus. The idea that we can get back to an objective historical reality, which we can wholly separate and disentangle from the disciples' memories and then use as a check and control over the way the tradition was developed during the oral and earliest written transmission, is simply unrealistic. This observation would have been more obvious had more attention been given to the narrative tradition, as distinct from the sayings tradition, over the past 150 years. For narratives about Jesus never began with Jesus; at best they began with eyewitnesses. From the first we are confronted not so much with Jesus but with how he was perceived. And the same is actually true of the sayings tradition: at best what we have are the teachings of Jesus as they impacted on the individuals who stored them in their memories and began the process of oral transmission."

Dunn drives this point home by noting that “the significance of the step being advocated here, therefore, should not be missed. For it is tantamount to asserting that faith goes back to the very *origins* of the Jesus tradition, that the Jesus tradition emerged *from the very first* as the expression of faith.”

It is important here for Dunn that faith in Jesus goes all the way back for then, as it were, there is no *uncontaminated* (non-faith) data about Jesus (not that there ever could have been anyway if by that we mean non-interpreted data). He makes this explicit when he says “I am asserting that the teaching and events of Jesus' ministry did not suddenly become significant in the light of Easter” and he continues “it is the recognition that Jesus can be perceived only through the impact he made on his first disciples (that is, their faith) which is the key to a historical recognition (and assessment) of that impact.” Dunn here is seemingly trying to block off any notion of finding a Jesus who was other than that of his first followers and gospel writers or of using supposed data in the texts to construct Jesuses that, for Dunn at least, are not in the text. This, one can assume, is what he earlier meant when talking about a historical and textual “normativity”. There is only the Jesus that impacted upon his disciples by causing faith in him in the text... that caused the text. Here Dunn's revival of norms in his own text is once more striking: “the Greek text is normative for translations and thus also interpretations of that text; the 'plain meaning' of the text (as defined earlier) has primary claim to be the voice of the text in the dialogue of meaning.” “For better or worse,” says Dunn, “these are the definitive and determinative texts for any talk of Jesus which aspires to historical integrity.” One senses here that the ideological straitjackets are being quietly popped onto historical Jesus researchers and this is confirmed when Dunn says “any attempt to present a Jesus stripped of the garments of faith is doomed to failure, given the

character of the Jesus tradition from the first.” The problem here is that Dunn neither gets to decide what “historical integrity” is in general or specific cases nor does he decide what readings (interpretations) have it awarded to them. Indeed, this whole argument of Dunn’s has been ideological and rhetorical since these questions and awards are always exactly the things under negotiation or investigation.

So this is all, of course, *flim flam, abject, base apologetics*. “Faith” here is not a special category of insight which cannot be separated from what it sees. Its simply another word for the fact that any story or information we receive came from someone else and, if we may say, through a grid of other points of view. (Dunn himself thinks even facts are interpretations and presumably he reserves the right to accept some and not others.) We do not habitually imagine we cannot see events or persons differently because the views it came packaged in and by which it was shaped are not ours. In fact, we think exactly the opposite. So why not here? What is so special about the synoptic gospels or the New Testament that sets them apart as incapable of being differently interpreted or interpretable? The notion that we have only a faith Jesus here is true but irrelevant - as any number of historical enquiries into Jesus have shown over hundreds of years. Dunn’s argument here is like arguing that in the Gospel of Thomas we have a “Gnostic” Jesus so its illegitimate to try and find any other (should we, for a moment, imagine that was the only gospel we had. In fact, Thomas shares just less than half its material with the synoptics). Making other cases, interpreting differently, being suspicious of sources, going against the grain, taking another view because reasons, is, in fact, exactly what doing history is. *Nowhere* are we forced to accept what we are told like a child presented with a teaspoon full of unappetizing medicine. This isn’t history but a rhetorical argument for the imposition of an ideological normativity. Its an attempted coup.

Dunn, however, ploughs on and wants to talk about “witnessing and remembering” and about using criteria of similarity (with first century Judaism and the early Christians). We know where that leads for we saw it already in the last chapter with Dale Allison. Dunn advances arguments of trust and authenticity and he here makes great play of a community controlled oral tradition which was subject to much repetition. This, he thinks, accounts for the pre-gospel transmission of what would become their texts. But we must suggest here that this is speculation (even if attempted informed speculation) and not knowledge (as all such arguments must be) as even Dunn admits:

“We certainly do not know enough about oral traditioning in the ancient world to draw from that knowledge clear guidelines for our understanding of how the Jesus tradition was passed down in its oral stage. Yet some general guidelines are possible such as that in oral tradition one telling of a story is in no sense an editing of a previous telling; rather, each telling starts with the same subject and theme, but the retellings are different; each telling is a performance of the tradition itself, not of the first, or third, or twenty-third 'edition' of the tradition. Our expectation, accordingly, should be of the oral transmission of Jesus tradition as a sequence of retellings, each starting from the same storehouse of communally remembered events and teaching, and each weaving the common stock together in different patterns for different contexts.”

Thus, Dunn wants to sometimes argue that, with regards to our best sources, the synoptics, “the more natural explanation for the evidence is *not* Matthew's or Luke's literary dependence on Mark, but rather their own knowledge of oral retellings of the same stories (or, alternatively, their own oral retelling of the Markan stories).” (Dunn gives several worked examples in his text.) He continues that:

"Students of the Synoptic tradition really must free themselves from the assumption that variations between parallel accounts can or need be explained only in terms of literary redaction. After all, it can hardly be assumed that the first time Matthew and Luke heard many of these stories was when they first came across Mark's Gospel."

Dunn therefore warns of "the blinkered perspective imposed by the literary paradigm." This, for Dunn, is a historical argument intended to shore up the historicity and authenticity of the account. Here Matthew and Luke are not unknowing buffoons altering texts they know nothing of but active members of oral communities working with stories they may already be familiar with. (It is very hard to prove they are this but nevertheless.) Dunn says:

"the assumption, almost innate to those trained within western (that is, literary) culture, that the Synoptic traditions have to be analysed in terms of a linear sequence of written editions, where each successive version can be conceived only as an editing of its predecessor, simply distorts critical perception and skews the resultant analysis. The transmission of the narrative tradition has too many oral features to be ignored."

Thus, we come to what Dunn regards as "appropriate conclusions":

1). *"The variations between the different versions of the same story in the tradition do not indicate a cavalier attitude to or lack of historical interest in the events narrated... the variations exemplify the character of oral retelling... they were the lifeblood of the communities in which they were told and retold."*

2). *"The differences introduced by the Evangelists, whether as oral diversity or as literary editing, are consistently in the character of abbreviation and omission, clarification and explanation, elaboration and extension of motif. The developments often reflect the deeper faith and insight of Easter; that is true. But they do not appear to constitute any radical change in the substance or character or thrust of the story told."*

These, in turn, Dunn thinks result in the following italicised conclusion: *"on the whole, developments in the Jesus tradition were consistent with the earliest traditions of the remembered Jesus."*

Dunn is thus arguing for the more essentially oral than literary formation of the tradition as a whole without denying literary activity can also take place. Here Dunn emphasizes "The character of the tradition as shared memory" and this is as "impact" not simply event:

"What we have in the Jesus tradition is the consistent and coherent features of the shared impact made by his deeds and words, not the objective deeds and words of Jesus as such. What we have are examples of oral retelling of that shared tradition, retellings which evince the flexibility and elaboration of oral performances. There is surely a Jesus who made such impact, the remembered Jesus, but not an original pure form, not a single original impact to which the historian has to try to reach back to in each case. The remembered Jesus may be a synthesis of the several impacts made on and disciple responses made by Jesus' earliest witnesses, but the synthesis was already firm in the first flowering of the tradition."

What's more "the traditioning process should not be conceived of as initially casual and only taken seriously by the first disciples in the post-Easter situation... community formation was already at an embryonic stage from the first call of Jesus' immediate circle of disciples; 'formative tradition' would have had an indispensable part in that process." Thus, Dunn can speak of "tradition sequences" (for example, he notes 8 from Mark's gospel) and these are "not layers but performances" as Dunn moves from literary to oral terms of description. So "Jesus tradition did not cease to circulate in oral form simply because it had been written down; hearings of a Gospel being read would be part of the oral/aural transmission, to be retold in further circles of orality; the written text was still fluid, still living tradition."

Thus we can come to summarize Dunn's position:

- 1). The churches were organised to maintain and to pass on Jesus tradition.
- 2). The assumption that prophecy within the earliest churches would have added substantial material to the Jesus tradition is misleading.
- 3). Oral transmission is a mix of stable themes and flexibility.
- 4). The relevance of the oral paradigm and the danger of assuming (consciously or otherwise) the literary paradigm must be kept in mind.
- 5). The combination of stability and flexibility positively cries out to be recognized as typically oral in character. (The material examined by Dunn, he argues, indicates neither

concern to preserve some kind of literalistic historicity of detail, nor any readiness to flood the tradition with Jewish wisdom or prophetic utterance.)

6). The pattern of the oral traditioning process is probably established more or less from the beginning (before the first Easter) and is probably maintained in character through to (and beyond) the writing down of the tradition.

Dunn's estimation is that:

"On the basis of all this we can begin to build a portrayal of the remembered Jesus, of the impact made by his words and deeds on the first disciples as that impact was 'translated' into oral tradition and as it was passed down in oral performance within the earliest circles of disciples and the churches, to be enshrined in due course in the written Synoptic tradition. This is to look for the 'characteristic Jesus' rather than the dissimilar Jesus."

And:

"The reconceptualizing of the traditioning process which I thus offer can be summed up as a call to recognize the living character of the process, as against thinking in terms of literary relationships between static entities (texts). To adapt Schweitzer's famous metaphor, the task of tracing the history of the Jesus tradition is not best conceptualized as an interminable journey through innumerable intermediate stations at which one must stop and change (the different layers of the tradition). The better image is a continuous run of performances of some classic, where performers and interpretation change but continue to perform the same classic. It is this postulate of continuity through performance which

makes it realistic to identify an originating inspiration still audible in and through the diverse performances. That still audible impact of word and act is what gives 'the remembered Jesus' historical substance."

This amounts to a criterion of trusting what is distinctive or characteristic about the tradition and has, by a different route, echoes of Dale Allison's "believe what's there or have nothing to believe in". Thus:

"In sum, the basic argument of this book can be summed up in a number of propositions. (1) The only realistic objective for any 'quest of the historical Jesus' is Jesus remembered. (2) The Jesus tradition of the Gospels confirms that there was a concern within earliest Christianity to remember Jesus. (3) The Jesus tradition shows us how Jesus was remembered; its character strongly suggests again and again a tradition given its essential shape by regular use and reuse in oral mode. (4) This suggests in turn that that essential shape was given by the original and immediate impact made by Jesus as that was first put into words by and among those involved or eyewitnesses of what Jesus said and did. In that key sense, the Jesus tradition is Jesus remembered. And the Jesus thus remembered is Jesus, or as close as we will ever be able to reach back to him."

What to make of all this? Of course, it should go without saying that this is not a demonstration but a rhetorical argument for seeing things a certain way. The traditions about Jesus as a whole are no doubt some mixture of oral and written and Dunn is no doubt correct that, on occasions, literary metaphors rule where oral ones should instead. However, this is not to demonstrate that the traditions about Jesus are substantially oral (much less "memory"), the carefully controlled possessions of a conscientious faith

community *and so trustworthy*. Dunn, as Allison, wants to make the point that the process of belief in Jesus was not merely a post-Easter phenomenon to bolster this point. Yet this is a matter about which historical surety is likely to continually elude us and it is one of the issues about which those on opposite sides of the various fences will continue to muster rhetorical arguments. Can it actually be proved how far back faith went? It certainly cannot in the way it can be shown that the documents we now have as evidence for Jesus are products of faith in themselves. Thus, what people believed when they saw Jesus or when they became his followers remains moot. We must also ask what it would take to demonstrate the extensive orality (valued explicitly as “memory”) that Dunn argues for here. The designation of oral traditions as “a mix of stable themes and flexibility” is fortuitously plastic to say the least. How might we show this in documents and distinguish it from purely literary transmission or literary transmission moulded in an overwhelmingly oral culture? These distinctions are surely relevant for Dunn’s theory to fly. And this is before we even mention how one might distinguish tradition, oral or written or a mixture of both, from simple invention (which could be passed on in the same ways) or “memory” from “not memory”. The so-called “intelligent scribe” is hardly a novelty in the history of ancient literary transmission and, least we forget, no autographs of any gospel are actually extant. Probability, let alone “confidence,” can then here only be rhetorical.

We should also note as a response to Dunn’s proposals how all of Dunn’s arguments have sprung up from the fertile soil of trust in his sources. This, I submit, has not been as a conclusion but as a presupposition. Dunn trusts the synoptic gospels to tell him the truth and so he creates arguments which aim to demonstrate that this is a reasonable and sober belief. In this he does not tell us why he has given his trust to those behind the

traditions that created them (which propose the dead walking around Jerusalem, turning water into wine, blind men seeing, etc.,) even though he, no more than you or I, can even precisely say who such people were. It is simply given and a hermeneutic of questioning suspicion, or at least questioning, something with which the very idea of a properly historical Jesus began, is conspicuous by its absence. Here also relevant is Dunn's discussion of the sources and his favour has, as with most scholars, fallen almost exclusively upon the synoptics (with able support from as much as can be dragged kicking and screaming out of the authentic Pauline letters) to the exclusion of Thomas and with only a half-hearted assent to contemporary views about Q. It is true to say that these gospels are areas of great controversy and debate but we should also note how, historically, scholars in Dunn's position of moderate conservatism are always those the most likely to drag their feet and the slowest to accept more contemporary probabilities and veracities. For such scholars traditional faith acts as an anchor on historical verisimilitude and encourages ingenuity to try and regurgitate faith positions as simultaneously historically credible ones. As attempts go, Dunn's here is quite moderate and even, in some respects, helpful but we should not be blind as to what motivates it or what its proponent imagines it then substantiates.

Thus, Dunn writes towards the end of his book:

"So, did Jesus see his calling as more than simply proclaiming the kingdom's coming and inculcating the kingdom life? Did he also intend somehow to 'bring in' the kingdom? Did he go to Jerusalem for what was his last (or first!) visit to challenge the leaders of Israel, a last do-or-die attempt to turn Israel back to its God? Did he see himself as lead-player in the final crisis which would result in God coming in his royal power to dispense judgment and

blessing? Did he intend that his anticipated suffering and death would somehow serve to ensure that the penitent faithful would come through their final tribulation securely into the kingdom? To none of these questions can we give a firm Yes. But neither can we give a firm No. And it remains more likely than not that talk of rejection (the prophetic tradition), of the son of man suffering, and of a cup to be drunk and a baptism to be endured began in greater or less part with Jesus himself reflecting on his own destiny.

Of the hints still clearly recalled in the Jesus tradition, there are two which have captured most attention, both traditionally and in most recent discussion: the talk of the Temple's destruction and its rebuilding (in another form?) and the last supper's talk both of a (re)new(ed) covenant and of wine to be drunk new in the kingdom. Beyond that, firm data more or less cease, and we are left to speculate on the basis of such further reflection as the Evangelists provide. What we can say is that the open-endedness or ambiguity of the hopes or aims expressed in these utterances reached closure and achieved clarity in the earliest self-understanding of the first Christians and in the way they rooted what they went on to experience, understand, and practise in these utterances."

This is all quite a moderate and sober, if now traditional, script and Dunn is much less punchy than some others on his side would be yet it does seem to cultivate and prosper on a certain type of ambiguity. This ambiguity may well be entirely justified yet, in such ambiguity, are not other conceptions of these events and of the gospels (and almost every point Dunn makes can be thought of another way) also justifiable? Thus, what should we make of Dunn when he says the following:

*"whatever we may make of the facts (interpreted data), it is almost impossible reasonably to doubt that the sequel to Jesus' mission began with different members of his disciple group(s) seeing Jesus alive, seeing him as 'risen from the dead'. Not least, these experiences and the conviction which they embodied from their first articulation of them ('resurrection') must have signified God's confirmation of Jesus. Which is to say, the hope that Jesus was remembered as indicating in regard to his own future had been vindicated, as he himself had been vindicated; the son of man had indeed come on the clouds to the Ancient of Days and received his kingdom. Which is also to say that to that extent at least Jesus' hope and intention in regard to the kingdom of God had been realised. So too, we could go on to argue, the transmutation of the disciple band into 'the church of God' which soon attracted the ire of Saul the Pharisee (Gal. 1.13) was a recognizable realisation of Jesus' hope for a renewed Temple (supported on the 'pillar' apostles — Gal. 2.9), just as the Lord's Supper probably functioned more or less from the first as the continuation of Jesus' practice of table-fellowship and symbol of the new covenant inaugurated in his death. So too, it could be pointed out, the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, only forty years later, proved as accurate a fulfilment of Jesus' other forebodings as one could ask for. So there was **the continuity of fulfilment** between Jesus' aims and hopes and what in the event transpired."*

(emphasis original)

Here historical construction flows into theological rhetoric almost without a join. It should remind us that the latter was always involved in the former and so that, as "postmodernism" suggests, there is, thus, no non-ideological history. Not even if you call the ideology "faith".

12. Jesus and the Mirror of Interpretation

The Christian is committed to the belief that certain things are true about the past. This... means doing serious history in the belief, which Christians share with some others, that the creator of the universe is also the lord of history, and in the further belief, peculiar to Christianity, that he has acted climactically, and not merely paradigmatically, in Jesus of Nazareth;... This belief will drive the Christian to history, as a hypothesis drives the scientist to the laboratory, not simply in the search for legitimation, but in the search for the modifications and adaptations necessary if the hypothesis is to stand the test of reality.³⁶⁶

There are many odd things in the canonical gospels with which we have become comfortable through repeated exposure, and many scholars just assume Jesus said or did these things.³⁶⁷

The above quotation by eminent New Testament scholar and equally eminent churchman, Tom Wright, is from a section of his book previous to the one I will focus on here on how matters theological should be approached in the context of New Testament study. In that previous book which, like the one in focus here, is part of a series that currently extends to four books, Wright commits himself to “critical realism” in a volume which wants to clear the methodological decks for the positive reconstructions of history to come. I say “positive reconstructions” and I do so deliberately since, as it turns out, Wright imagines that what he is doing, in my view, is reconstructing the past (something he imagines, in the case of Jesus, to be surprisingly open to our enquiries)

³⁶⁶ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1; SPCK, 1992), p. 136.

³⁶⁷ Stephen Patterson, “Apocryphal Gospels and Historical Jesus Research” in *Forbidden Texts on the Western Frontier* (eds., Tony Burke and Christoph Marksches; Cascade Books, 2015), p. 178.

and this, it turns out, is very positive from his point of view since it reveals an amazing, world-changing story of God's covenantal love (which, one imagines, he had already believed in anyway). "But hold on a moment," you might now be saying, "Hasn't Wright just admitted before even getting to Jesus, as a presupposition, that doing history as a Christian, which he clearly is and has been for decades, rising through the ranks of ecclesiastical orthodoxy along the way, commits him to *the belief that certain things are true about the past*? Yes, my imaginary interlocutor, it seems that he has. And having read fully three of the four volumes in Wright's *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series, which is the crowning glory of his distinguished academic career, it does not seem as if Wright feels any embarrassment about this.

We should be clear here that in *The New Testament and the People of God* Wright does not make any claim for either positivism or objectivity. So he is not simply either naive or a fundamentalist. (Numerous public speaking engagements over the years, especially in America, have, in fact, revealed Wright to be a patient educator of the naive and a cultured critic of the fundamentalist.) Indeed, one might make a very good case for saying that Wright's book on Jesus which I am to discuss here is *the best book on Jesus in my lifetime*. It is thorough, it carries intellectual weight, it is masterfully argued, it is bold and it is coherent within itself. Wright published *Jesus and the Victory of God* (JVG) in the same year, 1996, that I began my undergraduate degree in biblical studies. In two of the three years of that degree I chose modules to do specifically with Jesus and with the historical "quests" that I soon became aware had been undertaken by biblical scholars in the last 250 years. As my interest grew in that field Wright's was the first book I bought on the subject. So I have my own special connection with it even though, now, I am less inclined to agree with Wright's conclusions than I was then. Agree or disagree, though,

Wright's book is a mighty tome that asks questions of all who read it and it challenges those who disagree with its conclusions to think again. Reading it again to prepare for this essay I have myself had to do exactly that.

At the time of the publication of *Jesus and the Victory of God*, and in the immediate aftermath when it was discussed in academic journals and conferences, one of Wright's academic critics was one of my own teachers, Professor Clive Marsh. In particular, Marsh wrote a paper titled "Theological History? N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*" which was published in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, a version of a paper he gave on the book in September 1997 to the Jesus Seminar (not that one!) of the British New Testament Conference.³⁶⁸ Marsh's critique of Wright's book operates at several levels but one of these is that Wright is here creating theological history. This seems to accord well with Wright's own description of not just this book but all four in his series as he regards them as neither New Testament theologies nor New Testament histories but as something which is both neither yet more than either of these things. Wright seemingly wants to integrate such things into something else which becomes more, many-faceted and complex rather than simple. Marsh writes in his critique that *Jesus and the Victory of God* "is no simple history, and is possibly not simply history" and this strikes the right tone.

So to Wright's basic thesis which may be summed up as the idea that, in his view, "Jesus is reconstituting Israel around himself." Jesus is seen here as a reinterpreter of Israel and its history and as recreating Israel in a new and different way which includes making claims about himself as a person. This includes telling the story of Israel as his own story.

³⁶⁸ Clive Marsh, "Theological History? N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998), pp. 77-94.

An example here would be the parable of the sower in which, claims Wright, "Jesus is implying that his own career and kingdom announcement is the moment to which all Israel's history has been leading." Note here that Wright claims that Jesus specifically is doing this. Wright finds the New Testament gospels very perspicuous when it comes to the thoughts of Jesus. One hesitates to suggest Wright thinks they are "open windows into the mind of Jesus" but we are not far off if we think this reading Wright's book. Wright quotes lots of texts but his method is not to argue for them and establish them as authentic tradition. Wright's method is to assume the New Testament gospels are trustworthy and to allow the explicative power of his narrative to do the rest. So when Wright wants us to see the ministry of Jesus as an encapsulation and not merely the climax of the story of Israel and when he claims that "Jesus fully intended his stories to generate a new form of community" this is Wright going about what he regards as historical business: tell the story, build in the texts, make historical sense (in his opinion) of what's there. It is about creating a convincing, cohesive narrative.

One way he does this, as stated, is by arguing that Jesus was recreating Israel as a new kind of community. Israel here was not thought of as an abstract concept or notional idea but as the interrelation of people. Jesus, thus, created around himself a "fictive kinship" and the force of this new allegiance then undercut that to others, including even family ties. But it wasn't just a simple matter of new allegiances. Repentance was required (compare the message of John the Baptist) and this was in an eschatological context. Wright here, in a way that he seems very fixed on, equates this with the notion of a restoration of Israel and return from exile. For Wright whether he speaks about forgiveness of sins, return from exile or a renewed covenant it always means what Jesus means when he talks about the kingdom of God. When Jesus offers people this kingdom

of God he does so on his own authority, outside of official structures and, what's more, he offers it to the wrong people as well. This, thinks Wright, is what Jesus really did to offend the powerful. To speak of "repentance" in this context Wright thinks of more in communal than individual terms. Wright does not think Jesus was offering some protestant Christian notion of individual salvation. It was Israel that needed to repent. In addition to this, to complete the return from exile that so fixates Wright as an understanding of what Jesus was doing historically, Wright conceives that evil will have to be defeated and YHWH, the Jewish God, will have to return to Zion. Indeed, Wright sees these three, the return from exile, the defeat of evil and YHWH's return, as "the three major kingdom themes" of Jesus' teaching as part of his reworking of the traditional understanding of Israel. This all makes Jesus, in Wright's view, the supreme example of someone with the ability to retell the most important story of all, the story of how the Jewish God is actually king.

In embodying this vocation, Wright thinks that Jesus re-defines the Torah and acts prophetically and symbolically in the Temple. Indeed, he sees himself as the new temple and accepts, whilst re-defining it, the role of Messiah which is, for Wright, not a matter of divinity but of a correct historical understanding of Jewish beliefs regarding what this figure might stand for. But more than this, ultimately, Jesus "would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God". Such a self-claim, of course, could not but bring trouble. In light of all this, Jesus' death becomes readily explicable: Why did Jesus die? "Ultimately," for Wright, "because he believed it was his vocation." In order to carry through what he believed he was called to do, Jesus inevitably became entangled in the many and messy issues of his day which can only with difficulty and anachronistically be labelled "religious" or "political," some of which now, with hindsight,

may seem (wrongly) to be the primary causes of his death: such as upsetting the Jewish authorities or Pilate's need to get out of a tricky situation.

Key to all this, however, is eschatology. For Wright, Jesus is the eschatological prophet, is one more than a prophet, the eschatological prophet to end all eschatological prophecy. For this Jesus, thinks Wright, the true Israel is the eschatological Israel. The messiah (Jesus) is an eschatological figure. The return from exile, the defeat of evil and YHWH's return to Zion are all eschatological events that have to do with Jesus' person and ministry. This does not, however, mean that they are future events for Wright. Eschatological acts, he thinks, are this-worldly happenings in which God acts decisively. Apocalyptic turns of phrase, which Wright thinks are original to Jesus, are "metaphors with teeth" rather than talk about the physical end of the world. So stories told by (and, for that matter, about) Jesus may well be called "speech-acts." But that is only because we have needed to rediscover something that was self-evident to first-century Jews, thinks Wright: stories are never just stories, but are more closely connected with praxis than some can readily see. At the end of the day, "Jesus fits no known pattern" for Wright and his "mindset" - *which we can to a large degree reconstruct* - really does seem to have belonged to "some greater, more original, more subtle mind" than many people have often allowed. Jesus, thinks Wright, was one of a kind: "It is very unlikely that Jesus belonged to any of the sects of his day"; and "Modern western culture does not have too many obvious models for the kind of thing he was doing". It is not then surprising, he suggests, that historical research surrounding such a figure has been rather difficult to do for Jesus is not like anyone else.

This, then, is a concise summary of Wright's views about Jesus. In his paper critiquing the book, mentioned above, that these ideas hail from, Clive Marsh then makes four specific points which I think it well worth reviewing as a way of getting into a critique of this:

1). Marsh notes that "Wright adopts an approach to the Gospel evidence which is trusting first, placing the burden of proof on those who claim that material about Jesus' actions and sayings is inauthentic. This results in a preference for canonical material on the basis of the textual and historical work conducted." I would add that Wright doesn't even really argue for this either and his choice of which sources to rely on, in JVG at least, is perfunctory at best. Some stories, such as how Wright came to this view and why Wright reads so much of the New Testament gospels as uncontroversially indicative of the thoughts, deeds and words of Jesus, (which essentially means he simply takes the vast majority of it to be true) it seems, can pass as understood without telling them, much as Wright will argue in much of his book that "first century Jews" (a category which includes John the Baptist, Philo, Josephus, the High Priest Caiaphas, Saul become Paul and Jesus plus many, many others) simply (all) understood many things a certain way which we silly moderns have since got wrong.

2). Second, Marsh notes that Wright "builds into his enquiry a comprehensive picture of Second Temple Judaism, within which Jesus is to be placed." Yet Marsh also speaks of Jesus' "sociological freakishness" in Wright's account. Jesus carries the aura of a dislocated, "unique" figure. As Marsh says, "Jesus remains located and locked in a world of texts and ideas, and can be accommodated and made sense of quite coherently and tidily in such a world." This is a bookish, professor's Jesus which gives us pause when its constructor is a bookish professor and ordained defender of faith. It seems that Wright

is so obsessed with his metanarrative of “return from exile” and Jesus reconstituting everything around himself that the story becomes all encompassing. It all seems to very much function like a fairy tale which drags you into its thought world - whilst being claimed as history - much, in fact, as Wright claims that Jesus is doing himself in his own context! Jesus’ body becomes the story Wright is telling about it – but he disappears as a real, living human being who existed in a world of first century Palestinian human relations as a consequence because Wright’s story is pure idealism.

3). Third, Marsh notes that “Wright offers a re-interpretation of eschatology and apocalyptic, built upon the clear statement that ‘there is virtually no evidence that Jews were expecting the end of the space-time universe.’” This criticism of Wright involves his frequent affirmation that “no Jews whose opinions are known to us thought that their god was about to bring the space-time world, including land and Temple, to a sudden end”. At times Wright even belittles and ridicules those who believe this. He states concerning the belief in the visible and personal return of the Son of Man, “This monstrosity, much beloved (though for different reasons) by both fundamentalists and would-be ‘critical’ scholars, can be left behind... The truly ‘apocalyptic’ ‘son of man’ has nothing to do with such a figure”. Yet we do know that the Pharisees and their followers strongly believed in the resurrection of the dead. Surely this is not the kind of event that can fit in the normal space-time continuum of ordinary life? The Sadducees in their question about the resurrection (Mark 12:18–23) presume this. The resurrection hope of the Maccabean martyrs in 2 Maccabees 6–7 also cannot be fulfilled in a simple continuation of the present space-time world of ordinary life. Wright himself, in his earlier work *The New Testament and the People of God*, sees this as occurring in a continuum of space-time that involves a renewed physical world with a new physical,

resurrection body. In his third volume in the series, about the resurrection, Wright describes what happened to Jesus as “transphysicality”. This seems, to all intents and purposes, to be a quite different from normal space-time continuum.

4). Fourthly, Marsh points out that Wright “feels able to conclude that Jesus’ ‘mindset’ is largely identifiable.” Here Marsh goes on to say that “Wright denies that he is ‘venturing down the road of psychology’. Yet this is precisely what his exploration of the mindset of Jesus is, and must be, at least to some extent. His refusal to travel the psychological road should actually make him less, rather than more, sure about the substance and coherence of his conclusions.” Yet one thing you notice when reading Wright’s book is that Wright is very sure about a great many things (such as what Jesus was thinking) that not even colleagues on his side of the fence (like Dale Allison, for example) are nearly so sure about. What gives Wright this surety is hard to say but, given his rhetoric, one imagines that he really must believe in his own metanarrative’s all-encompassing explicative power. Here, however, it is noticeable that Wright tries hard to avoid having to discuss Jesus’ imagined divinity in his book and yet the figure produced seems so historically unique that he, ironically, becomes strangely divine anyway. If Wright imagines a man, it’s not exactly clear that’s what he ends up with.

To get a handle on what Wright is doing in JVG it is instructive to look at his preamble at the start of the book which relays a history of the “quests” for the historical Jesus to date. Here my thinking is that if we can assess Wright on these much better attested and knowable matters it may give us some clues as to how he approaches Jesus. So now what I intend to do is focus on this introductory part of JVG and subject it to a little critique of my own.

In his preface Wright reminds us that, in his former book, *The New Testament and the People of God*, he had argued that “the study of first-century Judaism and first century Christianity forces us to raise certain specific questions about Jesus: who was he? What were his aims? Why did he die? And why did early Christianity begin in the way that it did?” In being asked, at the time, what his latest book was about, Wright admits to a little embarrassment at having to say “Jesus” as, he claims, “It seems pretentious.” Yet it is Wright’s view that “these questions about Jesus are vital, central, *and as yet not fully answered*.” It is this “full answer” that Wright intends to give in the body of JVG. Here, even in his preface, Wright’s rhetoric in telling his all-encompassing and totally explicative tale, is set at high. “I come to this work as a practicing historian and a practicing Christian,” he states, before continuing, “my experience of both worlds suggests - to put it no stronger - that neither of them need feel compromised by intimate association with the other.” Wright goes on to say that “answers are available, if we keep to the high road of historical enquiry” but it soon becomes clear that by “history” Wright actually differentiates between ways of doing it and he will constantly rhetoricize in favour of something repeatedly called “serious history” or “genuine history” which he, and those like him, practice as opposed to those other scholars who do things another way and so, presumably, aren’t serious about their history at all. For the record, Wright has been a Christian believer throughout his adult life and employed in either ecclesiastical or New Testament studies roles. He has never been employed simply as a secular historian neither has he written on simply historical or historiographical matters.

Wright’s partisan and rhetorical take on the history of Jesus study in roughly the 220 years prior to the publication of JVG begins from his very first chapter where he is

concerned to address matters of history and faith. He writes of the move that Johannes Weiss and then Albert Schweitzer made to place Jesus within the historical paradigm of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries that they “rightly insisted that the historical jigsaw must portray Jesus as a credible and recognizable first-century Jew, relating comprehensibly in speech and action to other first-century Jews.” Of course, what is here “credible” is in the eye of the beholder. Yet here, from the beginning, Wright wants to integrate two questions (“who was Jesus?” and “so what?”) which, in his view, have shown how history has tended to separate the more historical first question from the more theological second question. It is as if, over the centuries, to do history one has needed to give theology the cold shoulder. But Wright does not think you need to do this. He states that:

“The underlying argument of this book is that the split is not warranted: that rigorous history (i.e. open-ended investigation of actual events in first-century Palestine) and rigorous theology (i.e. open-ended investigation of what the word ‘god’, and hence the adjective ‘divine’, might actually refer to) belong together, and never more so than in a discussion of Jesus.”

Is this some presupposition creeping in here? Is the unembarrassed Christian already anticipating an answer? “If this means we end up needing a new metaphysic, so be it,” says Wright. Here a footnote of Wright’s on the very same page as these remarks gives us pause: “by open-ended investigation I mean an investigation whose results are not determined in advance.” Yet, clearly, not one where “new metaphysics” or theological ramifications are not, however hesitatingly, contemplated. Yet it remains Wright’s conviction that “Christianity appeals to history; to history it must go” even if we have

"The recognition that the answers we may find might change our views, or even ourselves." Indeed, Wright, quoting his teacher, G.B. Caird, believes that anyone with certain religious convictions about Jesus is thereby committed to his historical study.

Wright then sets out on a contentious and, I would suggest, tendentious, description of the history of "modern" historical Jesus study consciously in the shadow of Albert Schweitzer and his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* from 1906. Schweitzer began with Hermann Samuel Reimarus and Wright does too. Here Wright's historical survey of past Jesus study serves the purpose of delivering to his reader two ways of doing it or revealing two types of historian. These are the (W)right way and the wrong way, the good guys and the bad guys. Perhaps, we think, the scholars of the late 18th and throughout the 19th century who wanted to strip back the gospel dogma, and the church's complicity in preserving it, were doing us all a favour by applying strict history to it. Wright doesn't think so:

"They were not. They were attempting to show what historical reality really was, in order that, having glimpsed this unattractive sight, people might turn away from orthodox theology and discover a new freedom. One looked at the history in order then to look elsewhere."

For Wright, as Schweitzer before him, Reimarus was correct in wanting to understand Jesus against a background of first century Judaism and here Wright thinks we are on the right track. Yet it is two scholars and, essentially, two books, in which Wright finds what, for him, is the crucial marker of whether you want to do "serious history" or not. These are Schweitzer, with his aforementioned *Quest* and, on the "unserious" side,

Wilhelm Wrede with his book on "the messianic secret" in Mark's gospel from 1901. I shall let Wright describe what he regards as the difference here in his own words:

"Wrede and Schweitzer, in their own way, both offered a development of Reimarus' basic position. Both thought that serious historical study of Jesus would come up with something very different to what mainstream orthodoxy had supposed or wanted. But there the ways divided. Wrede's book on the 'Messianic secret' in Mark went further than Reimarus: all we know of Jesus is that he was a Galilean teacher or prophet who said and did some striking things and was eventually executed. Mark's gospel, from which the others derive, is a theologically motivated fiction, devised from within an early church which had already substantially altered direction away from Jesus' own agenda. Schweitzer, however, while agreeing with Reimarus that Jesus belongs within his first-century Jewish context, insisted that the first-century context that mattered was not revolution, but apocalyptic. On this basis he was able to include within his own sketch far more gospel material than Wrede, and to suggest a far more nuanced development from Jesus, through the early church, to the writing of the gospels."

Here Wright reveals, yet again, a continuity agenda. Things all make sense together, Jesus should be snuggled in (if not smuggled in) between all the rhetorically authentic Jewish history and the early church we know will arise. "Explain Jesus in relation to these two without seeing the joins and we are 'serious historians'" is Wright's proposal. And so, tendentiously, we have our two ways, or two Bahns or two Strassen, as Wright will now term them:

"The Wredestrasse insists that we know comparatively little about Jesus, and that the gospels, in outline and detail, contain a great deal that reflects only the concerns of the early church. The Schweitzerstrasse places Jesus within the context of apocalyptic Judaism, and on that basis postulates far more continuity between Jesus himself, the early church, and the gospels, while allowing of course for importantly different historical settings in each case."

It seemingly does not occur to Wright, in his rhetorical position of historical certitude, that one might regard Jesus as at least eschatological *yet also* take the view that the early church had their own concerns and that the gospels are less than historically veridical documents. For Wright, to choose the Wright Jesus paradigm is to commit yourself to the inherent truthfulness of a picture of Jesus *and its accurate transmission and its literary portrayal in now canonical documents*. Here several historical narratives, canonical gospels, are regarded as the fabric of history. Given the choice, in Wright's mind at least, between knowing little about Jesus with Wrede or much with Schweitzer, Wright chooses much.

Wright moves to his own time and reports "heavy traffic on the *Wredebahn*" which is good news for his polemic as this means, in the context of when JVG was written, that he can have a good go at The Jesus Seminar and those more prominent of its members (which here means Burton Mack and Marcus Borg and especially John Dominic Crossan with a diversion, via the non-Seminar affiliated Gerald Downing, to the 'Cynic Jesus' thesis as well). Wright was at the time, and remains (although it is now largely defunct), a consistent critic of the Seminar and he sees them as the main heirs of Wrede in contemporary context. They are the bad guys, the people who, like Wrede, are not

serious about history, the people who choose to believe our sources are more creative than documentary, more fanciful than accurate. They do not see Jesus as an exponent of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. In fact, many of them expressly want to expunge any trace of such an agenda from Jesus. They are, thus, to be combatted.

Wright critiques the Seminar in two ways initially. First, he finds them positivistic in claiming to know “what Jesus really said and did.” This, as Wright had argued in the first volume of his series, is totally out of place in “serious history”. Second, Wright essentially accuses the Seminar of rigging the game and knowing all along what they wanted to find and so, hey presto, they found it. For Wright, the Jesus Seminar simply has a preference for a certain kind of Jesus and their scholarship is there to publicize it. So, for example, regarding *The Five Gospels*, a book the Seminar published in 1993 which was claimed to be their deliberation on which words attributed to Jesus were authentic and which not, Wright concludes: “The main reason these sayings are considered authentic is clearly not that each one has been tested individually against some abstract criteria, but that they have been chosen to fit into the picture of Jesus *which has already been chosen*.” It doesn’t escape Wright’s notice that many of the sayings the Seminar designated “authentic” were part of a Q-Thomas continuum (that is, were multiply attested in Q, one hypothetical source of Matthew and Luke, and Thomas, a non-canonical document first discovered in full in 1945) and so, for Wright, this is “*a particular view of Jesus and the early church, working its way through into a detailed list of sayings that fit with this view*.” Wright finds this totally opposed to his own rhetorical agenda of hypothesis and verification and of setting Jesus in a plausibly first century history. Instead, he imagines that, like Wrede, the Seminar’s scholars are deciding the gospels are fiction and so, by

academic means, they are attempting to write a new, "historical" story of their own making.

Wright finds a clear example of this in Seminar scholar, Burton Mack, who has indeed argued that Mark is fiction, a "myth of origins." Mack, indeed, Wright sees as an amalgam of two bad examples from the history of Jesus research, Wrede and Rudolf Bultmann, the latter of whom pioneered the chopping up of the gospels into bits and the building of tradition histories around them. This Mack updates into layers of tradition as when he talks about Q in which he is much interested. Then, for example, Mack can talk about "layers of tradition in Q" which Wright thinks is vaguely potty and historically imaginary. Mack's Jesus Wright interprets as a deJudaized cultural critic and he is caustic in response:

"Ironically, (Mack) has himself produced a new 'myth of origins'. First there is Jesus, not now either the 'son of god' or the 'son of man', but the Cynic wordsmith, 'softly spoken but extremely engaging', setting in motion a more or less non-Jewish tradition of social protest and transformation. The Opponent in Mack's scheme, taking the place in Mark occupied by the wicked authorities, who act diabolically to get rid of the innocent divine one, is of course Mark himself, who writes the real Jesus out of history and squashes his genuine followers under the weight of his soon-to-be-canonized authority. Instead of Mark's radical rejection of Judaism and the world, we have Burton Mack's radical rejection of that which became, and has continued as, mainstream Christianity, with its focal points as Jesus' saving death, the resurrection, the eucharist and the church."

In criticizing Mack Wright can fire off some quick fire judgments which he applies to Jesus scholarship more generally. Mack wants to implicate Jesus in the Hellenistic phenomenon of Cynicism but Wright retorts that evidence for any Galilean Cynicism is “slight to the point of invisibility.” Wright claims that the evidence in the canonical gospels must be accounted for as fully as possible and so accuses Mack and his kind of “drastic surgery comparable to cutting off an arm and a leg” in their cutting up of the gospels into authentic and inauthentic bits. Wright sees no necessary split between ‘prophetic’ and ‘wisdom’ or ‘apocalyptic’ and ‘sapiential’ traditions and he further criticizes “the attempt to discover social contexts within which the tradition could undergo... huge developments”. We don’t have such evidence, thinks Wright, perhaps also at the same time giving the impression that he wouldn’t like it to be found either.

This is especially true in relation to the Q gospel (a designation Wright seemingly despises) which Mack relies on heavily in his own constructive enquiries. Wright, indeed, is suspicious of Q and Q scholarship *tout court*. At least, a certain flavour of the latter. He doesn’t seem even particularly convinced that Q was one written source, much less is he prepared to engage the “modern fiction” that it can be described in its layers of composition and social location as a gospel of Galilean followers of Jesus. Not that this stops him opposing Mack-type scholarship on Q with studies that find opposing views more suited to his own overall conclusions. His point, he says, is that those “immersed” in Q every bit as much as Mack and John Kloppenborg, a scholar attached to the Jesus Seminar and who has done the most to hypothesize a Q gospel in its layers of composition and social location, have reached opposing conclusions. So Wright seemingly thinks we should not rush to judgment just because of that. But what, we might ask, about the historical Jesus generally does not find scholars arranged on

multiple sides with opposed conclusions? Since when has that alone been enough to stop the historically imaginative enterprise? In the end, Wright takes all of Mack's scholarship as of a piece and, as a historical hypothesis, finds it wanting. It does not tell a story that reads the evidence as he does, it does not follow the "seriously historical" research program which tells Jesus as a story of Israel.

Under the heading of "Wredestrasse" Wright gives most space to the work of John Dominic Crossan - and rightly so as he was a motive force behind the whole Jesus Seminar project and, perhaps, its most sophisticated representative, one who did much of the spade work on which it subsequently relied as well as producing perhaps the best historical work on Jesus to come from that grouping of scholars. His *The Historical Jesus: The Life of A Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, like Wright's own book, is still a thesis to be reckoned with to this day. In fact, should we for a second accede to Wright's own description of Jesus research into Wrede and Schweitzer types then Wright's is the contemporary descendant of Schweitzer's and Crossan's is that of Wrede. Wright recognises the force of Crossan's own major work by giving it more space in his own, a full 21 pages and, essentially, an essay within his own work to itself.

First Wright critiques Crossan at the level of method and at the level of the results of a stratigraphication Crossan performs on the whole Jesus tradition from 30 - 150 CE as part of this method which produces an inventory of both sources and sayings of Jesus. Wright, at this point, has already noted that this is a Bultmannian move (chopping up the gospels rather than explaining the whole) and that Crossan follows Wrede in believing Mark is fundamentally a fiction (which emphasizes a creative rather than a documentary nature to the book). One major problem for Wright is that, yet again, Crossan is

promoting a Q-Thomas form of Jesus. Wright, as already reported, is skeptical of Q and no less so is he of the non-canonical Thomas. Crossan puts first editions of both in his inventory of earliest sources, a procedure Wright finds illegitimate and clearly threatening. Wright is open-mouthed at Crossan's conjecture of a 'Cross Gospel' which Crossan has written about as a source of the extant Gospel of Peter and as the possible source for all the canonical accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Here we may say that Crossan is engaging in a historiography of possibility yet Wright thinks "Like so many of the judgments made in (Crossan's) inventory, this one depends wholly on Crossan's prior convictions both about Jesus himself and about the nature of early Christianity." (But then whose don't?)

As a reader of Wright's book I find this slightly annoying for one should not imagine that Wright is remotely as presuppositionless as he claims nor that the bad guys find what they want to find but the good guys, like him, don't. (Wright goes on, tiresomely, to accuse Crossan of having conclusions as starting points in disguise, always a sign of someone going off track for Wright.) Neither is his own thesis found to be free of "historical imagination" in a way that all others would accept. For example, even his own friend and colleague, James Dunn, describes Wright's obsession with the theme of "exile" in JVG to be an "idée fixe" in his *Jesus Remembered*. Were this theme of exile in JVG inappropriate it would affect Wright's thesis overall in no small way. But, in any case, imagining what *may* be historically relevant is not necessarily such a sin in either case. History is not fixed; it is open to interpretation. Here, however, we will find Wright's confused and not always consistent rhetoric against us for even though Wright talks of *critical* realism he does, in the end, rather seem to suggest that his *interpretation* of the past maps and explains reality in a way that only it could. But can an interpretation be

singularly true? Can a story explain and account for the flow of history? Questions to ponder. My own thought on this matter, held over 20 years since I first read Wright's book, is that if the "critical" part of "critical realism" is not critical enough to critique "realism" as a whole as an idea then I wonder just how "critical" it really is at all. In short, I find critical realism to be a pale and inadequate philosophy.

In the end, however, Wright essentially accuses Crossan of having produced a piece of flim flam with his inventories of sources and sayings. Not only does he regard the work in putting them together as an exercise in Crossan's conclusions finding a scientific looking inventory of data to give the appearance of rigour and methodology, but he suggests that Crossan has simply used it as window dressing to disguise what has really been going on underneath which is Crossan's performance, with great skill, of a novel and fictional tale about Jesus. In short, the historical reconstruction and inventory of sources and the compilation of a table of authentic Jesus sayings is not what Crossan has worked from to get his picture of Jesus, rather, it is Crossan's prior conclusions working themselves out in compiling the inventories. Here one contentious aspect of Crossan's picture of Jesus is his notion of apocalyptic with which Wright disagrees. (Crossan claims his Jesus is eschatological but *not* apocalyptic.) Ironically, Wright accuses Crossan of some idiosyncrasy and misunderstanding here whilst Wright himself proffers an understand of apocalyptic as "*not* 'the darkening scenario of the imminent end of the world' but the radical subversion of the present world order." For Crossan apocalyptic is essentially divine violence (as he has continued to repeat for over 30 years since *The Historical Jesus* was first published) whereas for Wright that is the unhistorical misunderstanding and the historical truth is that apocalyptic is metaphor. Wright has found not just liberal scholars like Crossan but fundamentalist and evangelical Christians

(who presumably want "the end of the world") opposed to his view. Essentially, however, what Crossan thinks of as eschatology, world subversion, Wright thinks apocalyptic language speaks of too. Crossan, however, thinks apocalyptic is not that but is the conception of the physical end of the world which Wright rejects, sometimes vehemently, as unhistorical. This has a large payoff in Wright's own work as he conceives that Jesus is actually the climax of God's action in the world in all its apocalyptic (world-subverting) reality. We can only say here that the confusion of these terms, and the inability of scholars in general to agree on their referentiality, does no one much good.

A major methodological divide between Crossan and Wright occurs over the consequences of Crossan's conception, in a context of social anthropology, of Jesus offering what Crossan calls "the brokerless kingdom of God". Crossan further conceives of Jesus as a "peasant Jewish Cynic" not unlike Mack does but by doing more work to thoroughly embed this into the Jewish context of his time. Yet Wright has questions for Crossan goes on to imagine that those who write gospels about this Jesus know little of the man as he was or his circumstances. Crossan conceives of Jesus as one who sets his kingdom against empires, patronage and brokerage, a kingdom of radical egalitarianism. But this isn't the gospel story in the New Testament. Crossan further conceives that gospel writers knew little about Jesus' death outside of the bare fact of it which, of course, took place in public for anyone to see anyway. Wright here objects to Crossan's notion that if things be scripturally explained, as the crucifixion surely is and as Wright agrees, then that means they are not also historically described. "Christian scribal activity", thinks Wright, is not necessarily "inventing narratives to cover a historical void." He continues that "if the sign of interpretative activity is the giveaway clue that the history has been invented, how then can there ever be any history at all?" Here Wright

thinks us firmly back again with Wrede: "Once you doubt everything in the story, and postulate a chain of events by which someone might have taken it upon themselves to invent such a narrative from scratch, all things are possible." He contrasts this with "But not all things are probable."

We need to stop here a moment and consider this conundrum. Wright thinks that interpretation does not (simply or necessarily) equal invention. Wright is also clear that there is no uninterpreted history. Wright objects that if something being observed as being interpreted in some overt way means "not historical" then no history is possible. But is Wright's philosophy of history up to snuff here? That all history is an interpretation we may grant for Crossan, Wright and I myself agree on that. But Wright seems to suggest here that history can have a reality at the core of its interpreted mediation rather than interpretation going all the way down. Interpretation may not mean invention but what if "reality" is itself a matter of invention, the invention that is what we call interpretation? "Invention" would here be a bad word for Wright and in a way it might not be for Crossan. Crossan, indeed, thinks the crucifixion narratives are invented in the sense of "not documentary evidence" but also in the sense of "interpretations" too. Wright would not go along with this *doubly interpretive* scheme.

So I agree that history is indeed possible and interpretive it certainly is. But is it not also invented too, constantly and in every case, invented as of its being? History can always be more or less documentary in nature and this is what Wright wants to see more of as it is found in the gospels but this is not to ask the question of what history is in itself at all. In the end, Wright is a Realist and that will always affect his history. He offers not interpretations of things but things he calls interpretations but which he wants to

rhetorically press home as things of more Realist significance than that. There is, in his mind, such a thing as a (W)right interpretation and that, once more, throws us back into all the necessary philosophical discussions, not least as to how history as interpretation (which he agrees with) and history as invention (which he doesn't) play a role in historical explanation of the past. It may be that the gospel narratives of the crucifixion weren't "invented" but that they were invented, because interpreted, nevertheless.

Leaving Crossan behind, we come to Wright's dismissal of the 'Cynic Jesus' thesis, one I have championed myself. (Indeed, I find myself definitively positioned in the Wrede camp by Wright's analysis even though I conceive of myself as fairly evenly straddling his two roads of scholarship believing, as I do, in an eschatological Cynic Jesus and in Cynicism as a form of eschatology.) Wright engages the scholarship of Gerald Downing on this matter although he could equally have done so through that of either Mack or Crossan who offer alternative versions of the same. Downing's work relies on making lots of parallels to gospel sayings and descriptions of Jesus with Cynic sources, many of which end up being part of the putative Q gospel and Downing develops a theory around this of a Q community that were "Jewish Cynic" from the start and which subsequent gospels must therefore disguise or reorientate in their use of Q material. Indeed, Downing is most clear that the history he conceives of was a mixture of both Judaism and Cynicism. But this isn't Jewish enough (or in the Wright way) for Wright: "When we find solid historical ground under our feet in the first century of Christianity, we find ourselves still in a very Jewish world," says Wright. Downing's Jewish Cynic thesis lacks "essential Jewishness that I find totally absent... For him, the worldview is Cynic, the incidentals Jewish."

Yet where Downing (and others) see the possibility of interpenetration, Wright sees only its inability: "It is a mark precisely of the Jewishness of early Christianity that it claims to fly in the face of all paganism... There is a fundamental difference of worldview." Here Wright, at a 2,000 year remove, *tells us what must be true and what is absolutely impossible*. It is not very convincing for you can rarely say in history what it was impossible for people to think or do. A Cynic Jesus may not, in some historian's view, be the most probable Jesus but it is not a totally impossible one either. Wright takes the route of suggesting that all the parallels between Cynic and (Jewish) Christian thought, carefully and exhaustively catalogued by Downing, are "superficial" and he can only bring himself to see in exclusive terms, Cynicism *or* Judaism, Judaism *or* Cynicism, but will admit not even to the possibility of some mixture of the two. Here Wright's analysis is simply weak and blinkered, blinded by an all-encompassing vision of a not so very pluriform Judaism from which he cannot escape. (Were John the Baptist and Philo of Alexandria, both Jews, the same?!) Indeed, when one looks at the picture of Judaism that Wright wants to fit Jesus into generally one finds that it is, more or less, a normative rather than a pluriform phenomenon. Wright's controlling narrative is quite purposefully controlling. *He thinks he knows what all Jews must be thinking as well as how*. This should give us pause for thought as should Wright's moment of doubt before he leaves Cynic Jesus behind:

"Perhaps the most important thing that this new movement of scholarship has done is to alert us to the fact that to make Jesus a first century Palestinian Jew does not necessarily mean that he will be, so to speak, recognizably Jewish through and through. We no longer think... of Palestine in this period as encircled with an invisible steel curtain that kept out ideas and influences that were circulating in the ancient near east in general. It may well be

that, when scholarship has got over the determination to make Jesus as apparently 'Jewish' as possible, it may well have to weave in other factors as well."

Basically, we should not be too stiff and determinative about what "Judaism" or "Cynicism" is or was. Downing himself has counselled this, finding a Jewish Cynic Jesus in the process. Wright's view of these things has been rather more static and overdetermined and he has not.

After briefly interacting with the work of Marcus Borg, Wright moves to a summary of Wrede's contemporary disciples. Here he charges a "continued Bultmannian reliance on the sayings of Jesus as primary material" (which is not a "serious answer" to history in his view) and this, in turn, necessitates the "spurious" idea that history can be done by assessing these sayings through criteria of differing kinds. Ultimately, what we need to do, says Wright, is explain "the big picture" and, implicitly, we need to do this as it is given (so Allison and Dunn, his co-travellers). Wright suggests that this "Wredebahn" view of Jesus works:

"with an overall picture of Christian origins that ought now to be abandoned. It is the Bultmannian picture, with variations: a deJudaized Jesus preaching a demythologized, 'vertical' eschatology; a crucifixion with no early theological interpretation; a 'resurrection' consisting of a coming to faith, some time later, of a particular group of Christians; an early sapiential/gnostic group, retelling the master aphorisms but uninterested in his life story: a Paul who invented a Hellenistic Christ-cult; a synoptic tradition in which rolling aphorisms, as they slowed down, gathered the moss of narrative structure about themselves, and gradually congealed into gospels in which the initial force of Jesus' challenge was muted or

lost altogether within a fictitious, pseudo-historical framework. This modern picture, in fact, is the real fiction."

Yet couldn't both this and the gospels be too? Wright is never shy of the easy either/or; "take the good way I offer or the way of darkness that is the only other way instead" is his constant and considered rhetoric. Hence he can condemn heartily "the blithe reconstruction" of Q, not only as a document but in its compositional layers, by his scholarly opponents as one of a host of academic sins which will only lead astray. Needless to say, many of those opponents would dispute that their Jesus is "deJudaized" or a matter of "vertical eschatology" but Wright is a lover of his own metanarratives, as both his book and his Jesus make very clear. In fact, here comes another one. Wright's answer to this contemporary continuation of Wrede's scholarship is his (and others') continuation of Schweitzer's in what he terms the "Third Quest."

It is with the Third Quest, another example of Wright's ability to impose metanarratives on history, and ones that may receive deconstructive critiques from others to boot,³⁶⁹ that we reach the age of "serious study of Jesus," "seriously historical books" and "a real attempt to do history seriously." Wright lists twenty writers on Jesus he regards as being equally as "serious" about "real" history as himself and they exhibit a thematic similarity. "Third Quest," as Wright invented the term, describes a *type* of historical Jesus study and not just a chronological phase. This is the Schweitzerian, apocalyptic eschatological type. It sites (and cites) Jesus within Judaism (spoken of by Wright now as "complex pluriformity" but one outright doubts if his narrative follows that through) and says that Jesus must be comprehended and understood as "a crucifiable first century Jew whatever the theological or hermeneutical consequences." (Wright keeps intimating

³⁶⁹ See Clive Marsh, "Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective" in *BibInt* 5/4 (1997), pp. 403-37.

there will be some.) Wright gets very rhetorical about this as when he states that “the pursuit of truth - historical truth - is what the Third Quest is all about.” This elicits a methodological statement of some import about the Third Quest:

“It is vital that this point of method be grasped from the outset. Within the Third Quest, which is where I locate this present book, the task before the serious historian of Jesus is not in the first instance conceived as the reconstruction of traditions about Jesus, according to their place within the history of the early church, but the advancement of serious historical hypotheses - that is, the telling of large scale narratives - about Jesus himself, and the examination of the prima facie relevant data to see how they fit.”

Wright then parses this as a set of five questions which all the “serious” historians are asking and these five questions are themselves “all subdivisions of the larger question which... all historians of the first century should be asking.” This question is basically to ask how we account for Christianity by the time of Ignatius of Antioch in 110 CE and its reference back to a recently significant figure, Jesus. Wright’s five subdivisions of this overarching question are:

- 1). How does Jesus fit into Judaism?
- 2). What were Jesus’ aims?
- 3). Why did Jesus die?
- 4). How and why did the early church begin?
- 5). Why are the gospels what they are?

We can, if we want, see these as quite a narrow set of questions. Criticism that Wright is fixated with a historical/theological enquiry (but not a sociological, anthropological or even political one) are well founded. In this his comment that first century Judaism and the gospels are “opposite edges” that all discourse must take place between is instructive. Wright is not broadening the enquiry in any sense but is merely putting a fresh lick of paint on well worn paths. Others, notably his Wrede-influenced opponents, have provided enquiries that are much more multi-disciplined than Wright would seemingly be interested in providing but, when they do, they end up being seen by him as producing “pale Galileans” or “modern fictions”. Wright, for all he issues guarded praise for studies that go into other areas, never quite seems to think they end up adding vital impetus to fresh historical views of Jesus. For him, historical hypotheses that deal with Judaism on the one hand and Christianity on the other - and that are theologically interested - are quite enough. Thus, Wright’s criterion of “double similarity” in which, if something can be seen as credibly (if subversively) Jewish and credibly as an “implied starting point” of something that becomes Christianity, then we may claim it for Jesus. This, thinks Wright, is “genuine history”. We might be forgiven for wondering, though, what about a first century Jew that was claimed as a religiously significant figure by Christians *wouldn't* be something to do with these two. But, no matter, Wright wouldn't, as a matter of method and principle, be interested in such things anyway.

Such is discussion of how Wright deals with historical study of Jesus in modern context. It has, to my mind, revealed a far from disinterested scholar and one who, contrary to his own protestations, certainly has shibboleths, and shibboleths which seem to function as presuppositions, something he dislikes in others. It falls now to me to sum up Wright’s study as a whole and I have several points to make:

1). My first point, not a surprising one when it is about a retired bishop, is that Wright is a preacher, a rhetorician. An example here is that he frames his positive thesis with an exegesis of the parable of the prodigal son to which he repeatedly returns as a running theme throughout his book. Wright, in his rhetoric, manages to make this about Israel and exile (which one critic, Robert H. Stein, charges “flies in the face of the entire history of this parable’s interpretation”³⁷⁰) and so Jesus as a man who tells stories about the Israel that he is building around himself. This fits very well on the lips of a 20th and now 21st century research professor of the New Testament but what about on the lips of a wandering (and possibly illiterate) Galilean? His constant clarion call of “serious history” would suggest, however, that his tendency is to rhetorically over-egg the pudding and this may well be the case here too.

2). This leads to my second point which is that Wright knows too much. He keeps telling us what things *must* mean and what people *must* have thought. He thinks he knows “the fundamental contours of Jesus’ mindset” or that “Jesus held to a complex but thoroughly coherent network of aims and beliefs.” He cannot *know* this though he can, of course, argue for its possibility or probability. An example: in talking about “the kingdom of God” in Jesus’ usage Wright argues that “The question is *not*, did ‘kingdom of god’, for Jesus, still mean ‘Israel’s god, the creator, at last asserting his sovereign rule over his world’, with the connotation of the return from exile, the return of YHWH to Zion, the vindication of Israel by this covenant god and the defeat of her enemies? That simply *was* its basic, irreducible meaning within first century Palestine.” Wright goes on to argue that the proper question becomes how Jesus reworks this for his own purposes. The problem is, however, that Wright cannot know this and colleagues of his

³⁷⁰ Robert H. Stein, “N.T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God: A Review Article”, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/2 (June 2001), p. 211. Stein goes on to say, correctly in my view, that “One gets the impression that Wright is obsessed with his thesis, and all texts are squeezed to conform to it” (p. 212).

have not even claimed this themselves. He is interpreting his texts and then extrapolating as if alternative views are impossible. This isn't illegitimate by itself but it becomes so when too much is claimed for it. And Wright is a thorough-going master of doing so.

3). Wright claims that apocalyptic language, and so Jesus the apocalyptic prophet who can make speeches such as Mark 13 (which Wright thinks is authentic to Jesus), is about investing the space-time world with, for want of a better term, its cosmic significance or, as Wright phrases this, is "an elaborate metaphor-system for investing historical events with theological significance." But it is *this-worldly*. Wright is adamant that it is not about the physical end of the world and he charges those who think of it in violent, physical and even extra-terrestrial terms with being crass and unhistorical literalists. Yet Wright points out, at the end of this book and in over 800 pages of the next one in the series, that the only reason Christians came up with for continuing to talk about Jesus was that "he was raised from the dead." This, for Wright, though surely apocalyptic talk, is *not* metaphorical speech and is something very physical. (In his next book in the series Wright describes Jesus' resurrection as "transphysical".) This, it seems to me, is inconsistent. Is apocalyptic language metaphorical or not or is Wright's definition incomplete or even faulty or only partially applied for tendentious reasons? Presumably for Wright "resurrection" must always be about more than wordplay?

4). Wright speaks of Judaism's "complex pluriformity" but does his own conception of Judaism, in a place he now wants us to see as susceptible to outside influences from the Ancient Near East, not to mention the influences of a Hellenistic, Roman Levant, really match up to this? Here a test case is his views on Judaism and Cynicism in which he is

shown to have a very stubborn view of what seemingly *all* Jews will and won't allow. Any mixture of these two, even as a possibility in an individual, seems for him an unconscionable impossibility. Another example is where, at the end of the book, Wright speaks of Jesus as "a good first century Jew" who, according to Wright, all believed "that Israel functioned to the rest of the world as a hinge to a door." This does not sound like a "complex pluriformity" of views to me. In fact, it sounds very like a new normative Judaism, one amenable to Wright's storytelling.

5). Fifth, we may point out that, yet again in my catalogue of broadly conservative scholars, Wright's is a quest for the continuity Jesus. Seeking for Jesus is about securing the historical anchors to Judaism and Christianity, not questioning them or the texts upon which they are based which are in receipt of an unexplained and unwavering trust. It is, as Stephen Patterson intimates in the quote at the head of this chapter, about assuming what's there in the (canonized) text and then explaining it historically. Such a scholarship is "critical" only when it comes to those who disagree with this approach and is rarely critical of the story that especially the synoptics want to tell.

6). Sixthly and lastly, Wright protests too much. Wright claims his conclusions "were not in view" when he set out upon his enquiry and that he faced "historical problems" along the way. These, says Wright, challenged his faith and he faced the question of how history and belief might cohere. But I suggest that what shows throughout his study which is, as already suggested, a magisterial work of imaginative, historical-theological apologetic, is that, psychologically at least, Wright has very much started where he finished, with Jesus as Lord and Messiah, a person in whom faith can still be put. This, I suggest, is exactly because Wright's enquiry, brilliant though it is, is a work of historical

and theological coherence with Wright's own pre-existing beliefs. The study may have required Wright to reweave those beliefs and to engage in new historical understandings but it hasn't caused him to fundamentally abandon them (as, by the way, similar study in the late 1990s did to me). They are as new shading on pre-existing structures rather than demolition of old structures for the constructing of new ones.

This last point is worth dwelling on for, in the end, I cannot but see Wright's Jesus, the reweaver of the story of Israel who makes that story the climax of the story of God, as analogous to Wright himself. For it is Wright who reweaves the story of Jesus, makes it about Israel's return from exile and the triumphant climax of their god's activity to redeem his creation, nothing short of that god's "victory", in fact. Yet Wright's Jesus is only doing what Wright himself is doing (although I do not suggest this is necessarily conscious) in his own academic and theological contexts. For as Jesus tells a new, subversive story of Israel so Wright tells a new, subversive story of Jesus as Israel. Wright tells stories of serious history and theology and Jesus embodies serious stories of history and theology. It seems that the mirror or the deep well that historical Jesus scholars tease each other with is still in evidence so that we can only end our study of Wright's work by asking "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the most historical Jesus of them all?"

13. Jesus in Hermeneutic Context

*The tradition is never what is simply over; nothing is ever simply dead. The tradition is us, part of our being, where we have come from, and we are reflecting upon it with the resources that it itself has given us.*³⁷¹

There are good reasons to see things one way instead of another. At least, most people, you would imagine, would happily agree with this sentiment. But those same people would probably have much more difficulty in agreeing on what ways things should be seen and why. In this respect the debate that goes on around “the historical Jesus” is like any other; there are good reasons to see him like “this” instead of like “that” and everyone agrees with this suggestion: but there is rather less agreement on what “this” and “that” may refer to.

Such has been the situation that I have chosen to enter by writing books and essays on the historical Jesus. Normally, when setting out on such a project, one would do one’s theory and method at the start. If you should cast your eyes back to my first historical Jesus book, *The Posthistorical Jesus*,³⁷² there you will see that there were various parts of that book that did betray a methodological and even a philosophical interest. Neither did these interests necessarily stop there. Indeed, throughout my previous books such interests (as well as a literary-hermeneutic one) have been bubbling just under the surface. They were not always overtly discussed as theory but they were carried out as practice. So it is that when I come to this chapter of this book on the (post)historical

³⁷¹ John D. Caputo interpreting the views of Hans-Georg Gadamer from the latter’s *Truth and Method* (2nd revised edition; trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; Continuum, 2004) in his *Hermeneutics*, p. 107. The German original of *Truth and Method* is from 1960.

³⁷² Essays 2, 3 and 4 from this book are from this source.

Jesus that only *then* do I produce perhaps my most overt writing on theory, on method, on interpretation, on hermeneutics. And this is not so inappropriate as it seems if we are appropriately Kierkegaardian about it and imagine that “we live forwards, but we understand backwards.”

Taken in that way, this chapter becomes a “what has been going on?” both in this book and in the other books I have written, generally speaking. The simple answer to that question, both in this book and in my series of books and essays generally, is “interpretation has been going on.” However, I imagine that such readers as I have would not be overly interested if I simply left it at that. Thus, I must continue to write and, fortunately, it seems that I have more to say about what has been going on too. What has been going on in the three essays previous to this one, for example, is that I have read large parts of three books and then interacted with them in ways I thought was important for the general practice of reading and interpreting Jesus historically. Hopefully, such activity has read the source material in a way that was perhaps not intended by the author and has lead further readers to consider this other point of view that perhaps wasn’t either theirs or what they regarded the source’s as being either. This is a best case scenario - for other points of view, honestly and genuinely given, are useful tools all round.

My point of view throughout the other books I have written, and this one no less than the others, is that writing about Jesus is “fiction.” I say “fiction” and not “fictive” - which I could have said instead but didn't. This was not a case of choosing one word over the other on my part. “Fiction” was just the word that came to mind when I thought of the gospels (or books claiming to set out who the historical Jesus was). I can equally affirm

that I believe writing about Jesus is “fictive” too if it helps anyone but, for myself, I am happy with the term “fiction.” What I mean in using this word, which is the important thing, is that any connected narrative about Jesus, either in canonised books or academic tomes or anywhere else, is not to be equated with the essence of who Jesus is or was. (Not that thinking people have “essences” is a good idea. Its a stupid one.) Fiction is an interpretation; it is rhetoric; it is a “take” or a “viewpoint” or an “opinion”. Whatever the detailed specifics of Jesus and his life were they are not to be encapsulated, contained or inherently explained in anyone’s story or narrative or history. “Fiction” here for me is useful because I use it as an example of what philosopher Richard Rorty called “kinds of talk that are better than others” in a context where we can talk about things in different ways and so mean different things. I also use “fiction” here in the sense that Nietzsche said that “there are no facts, only interpretations.” Its my view, in fact, that we fictionalize the world, that all our understandings of things, things that are for us facts but put together into larger, connected understandings of things, are fictions. “Fiction” here doesn’t mean “not true” and does mean “things that work in the world we all inhabit.” But we need to get into this discussion a bit more for the terms I’m using to coalesce and so you get an idea for the particular fiction I am telling here about how I think.

What I’ve been doing in my (post)historical Jesus books is a matter of texts and interpretations and readers. I have been one of the readers but those I have interacted with have been readers too. Reading is, for me, and I think for human beings generally, a very important activity. And this is not simply a matter of books either for, as I see things, we are all readers of our lives and our surroundings and existence generally every day. This is to say that “reading” is part of our nature, what makes us who we are. You

may have noticed at the beginning of the chapter “Textual Jesus”, for example, that I used a metaphor of reading that I took from the Kabbalists of the medieval age where the idea of “text” absorbed everything else, even God, and so could be “read” just as a text would be. I find this metaphor very helpful. Reading itself, of course, is a matter of texts *and* readers. You need both, not one or the other, for reading to be a complete activity, for reading, and so interpreting, to take place.

In this scheme authors, for me, function as, in effect, “first readers” of texts. But even though authors are first readers, they are not normative readers providing the way we “should” read the text, neither are they determinative readers telling other readers what to think and much less are they providing final readings. Authors, as writers, have certain privileges (they get to write the text!) but once its written much of their influence goes. Their first reading is the gift that they give to the community of their readers. But then along come those readers who I like to think of, in actual fact, as reader/writers for what they do, in the act of reading, is rewrite the text. This doesn’t mean that they get out word processors and physically rewrite it. But it does mean that the markings the author puts on the page have a lack of fixity about them which comes with using language. We should also be reminded, of course, that the activity of reading requires a text, yes, but also a reader (or reader/writer). And who knows what that person brings with them, what influences they’ve had, what concerns they carry, what animates their beliefs? All this, quite properly, will go into the act of reading/writing.

Looked at this way texts become much less determinative things than some people like to think. This, I think, is because reading is not simply about texts; its about texts *and* readers. But I think its also about the fact that texts are forever recontextualizable too.

We might wish that the author forever hovered over us to tell us what she meant when she said something. But she isn't there and, even if she was, she would likely have to concede many times that something or other was "a matter of interpretation" or could be read to mean different things. She would have to admit that the language she used was a social phenomenon and so not entirely hers to command or control. Some mischievous authors even build ambiguity into their texts exactly to provide such multivalency of meaning and an opportunity to read the text in different ways. One thinks of poems, for example, which are a kind of writing in which ambiguity can play a large part. Here we are not trying to nail anything down but to provide an experience of text and reader which is an exploration of possible meaning. Poems cooperate with this type of impulse but, in principle, pretty much any text can be made use of in this way. Such possibility is inherent in text and in language which is opportunity *for* communication but not inevitability *of* communication or of *a certain kind of* communication.

But perhaps you are still skeptical of this. In that case there is an anecdote about German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, that I can relay. In 1927 Heidegger published *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), a mammoth (and, as a project, never finished) book about ontology, the study of being. In the 1930s and 1940s other people came to read this book (one of them was French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre) and they read it in a certain way, a way which did not please its original author, Heidegger, who thought these readers had misunderstood it. So what did Heidegger do? He gave out a new reading of his book in further lectures and writings which was in contrast to the way these other people were reading it and which, arguably, wasn't the sense of what Heidegger had written in the first place in 1927. Now it is here by the by that *Sein und Zeit* is, famously, a

very difficult text to understand in any case. My point in relating this story is that the original author changed his mind about what the text meant. So what, actually, is the sense of *Sein und Zeit*? What does the text mean? To which “author” will you appeal, the one of 1927 who thought one thing or the one of 1947 or 1957 who thought the very same text meant something else? What I think this example shows is the anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist, anti-authorial point that the text itself, the markings that Heidegger made in the 1920s, by themselves, tell us nothing. Texts mean only in cooperation with readers (who are situated in specific communities) and that meaning, from the same markings, can be different and can change.

This is a problem for those (some of whom get referenced in this book) who want to regard text as primarily about communication. For language, whether written or oral, isn't simply and naively communicative. Language isn't, we may say, like mathematics. It isn't a case of $2+2=4$. Sometimes $2+2$ might $= 4$. But in language we realise that things aren't so necessarily formulaic. If they were language would be a lot less fun and, incidentally, a lot less communicative. Here I like to think of language as a bit like music. John Cage was a famous musician of the 20th century in the “avantgarde” scene. But he wasn't always so inclined. In the 1940s he was one who thought that music was a matter of communication. But he found that if he wrote music trying to “communicate” with the audience he wouldn't always get the response he had expected. Perhaps he wrote a “sad piece” but several members of the audience laughed. Or vice versa. Around 1945 Cage came to the view that music couldn't be simply communicative because, if it was, he should be able to make his audience respond to what he thought he was communicating through it. But he found that music wasn't communicative in any simple or determinative way.

Language is the same. (Music, we might also say, is a kind of language itself.) Another of the most famous philosophers of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, thought of and wrote about language in terms of what he called Sprachspiel (language games). To play games you need to know the boundaries of the games and the rules for playing but, using those boundaries, players are still free to be innovative and creative in playing the game. So its not that you can say anything and it will be understood but you can use the rules and the sense of context that all games have to express yourself differently or give new contexts to old moves, for example. Games explicitly allow for creativity and even encourage it. You may at this point be thinking, "But of course language is communicative, that is what its for." I understand this point. But my point here is that although language is used for communication this is not to say either how it works or what is happening when we use it *or* that its end (its purpose) is guaranteed. To say that with language we *can* communicate is not to simply say that language *is* communication or that any use of language makes its intended communicative mark. What, for example, about silence? Silence, if used "linguistically", can be a pause (there are several types of pauses we can think of such as "dramatic" or "for effect" or to show some kind of respect) or it can indicate displeasure or it can mean you're not talking to someone (which communicates a message nevertheless). But silence itself is *nothing*. Yet when used in a language game this nothing becomes an example of something and can be used creatively and meaningfully. It can mean. So I do not like to think of language as simply communication. It is the opportunity or possibility for communication but it is not in any simple sense direct or mathematical about it. Language is not an equation.

Language is always a social business which is why none of us, authors or readers, can ever completely control it. No word came to us without a history (or even several

histories) and no word means or signifies either in isolation or in private. But words can be moulded and used in new ways which is part of the using the boundaries and rules of the game to our advantage that I spoke of a moment ago. These words, when put to work, can shape our understanding. If you've read my books you will have already seen that I am one that, perhaps, uses words in idiosyncratic ways or likes to form my own uses and understandings of words to conceptualise and express ideas that are important and have meaning for me. In thinking about my books and what has been going on ("interpretation" was the short answer), a number of words came to mind as important for elucidating what my own understanding of what I was doing was. As I wrote them down I needed to think of a title for them and I chose "good words". Why they are "good words" is because, for me, they express how I understand myself in the world, the world itself, the task of enquiry (by which I don't simply mean the academic kind), the business of being, or becoming, a human being, and much more. There are twenty three words in total and what follows next is each of those words and my "as concise as possible" definition of what I understand by them.³⁷³

EXISTENCE: Existence is a property things have (the property of being something and not nothing and perhaps the property of being signified in language) and which human beings, perhaps uniquely, are conscious of. This puts human beings in the position of being able to reflect on their existence and, technically speaking, all their activities are both the consequences of, and interpretations of, their existence. Human existence sets up each human being's own self-referentiality.

³⁷³ I recognise, of course, that books could and, in some cases, have been written about each one of these words. This, then, is my exercise in concisely defining these terms for myself in my own thinking without too much cribbing from canonical others from the philosophical tradition to copy their notes. It is an exercise in owning and naming my own thoughts which, of course, are permanently revisable and have histories of their own.

CREATION: From a human perspective, creation is a capacity to use what is already to hand and make new, and invest this new with meaning. Each such creation is also simultaneously a destruction. Or each destruction is a creation, depending on how you want to see it.

PARTICIPANT: In my thinking we are all “participants”. What this means is that we are “in-the-midst” of others and always neither at a beginning nor an end. This could relate to life, community or language, all of which we are thrown into at birth so that we come into them when they are all already taking place. As we grow and learn we become participants in such social phenomena which are surrounding and submerging us. We may make use of them by participating in them but they are beyond our control in any absolute sense.

MEANING: Meaning takes place within systems and happens when two or more items are brought into relationship with each other as an act of thought resulting in some resonance.

CONTEXT: Context is an ever-present. Anything and everything takes place in some context or interlocking or coinciding succession of contexts. Context affects meaning and understanding and is an implicit component of each.

PLAY: Play is what I think of as “being-in-the-midst” and this conception conceives of life itself as a succession of different types of game. Here there are no subjects or objects but only players. In this “being-in-the-midst” that is play authors are players and readers are players (and texts are what are played). All are participants in whatever game they

are playing whether that be language use, being a member of some community or composing texts. As such, using this metaphor all are conceived of as relating to each other as players of games.

BECOMING: Becoming is understood in my philosophy as a “being always on the way” in recognition of the fact that we are forever “unfinished” and with no particular terminus in mind (as a matter of fact rather than intention). So, in this, we are forever writing the text of ourselves, as well as other things, without ever precisely knowing where any of it will end up - for we do not know the end of the story.

CONSCIOUSNESS: Consciousness applies to a sense of self or of a grouping or of an age. It is a feeling or intuition that is inhabited rather than being conceived of as reasoned knowledge or fact. It is evident, and produced, in a social setting and arises, as human consciousness, without conscious thought.

TRADITION: By tradition I mean to refer to the fact that everything has a history, a history of its use, a history of its existence, a history of itself in human consciousness. All these traditions are interlocking with, and interpenetrative of, each other in our social life which means that we are part of the traditions of the things we talk about in life or in enquiry. We become a part of the tradition of their use or understanding or interpretation but stand downstream of the earlier traditions about those same things of which we are a part (and upstream of later uses that will appear after us). This is to say that we enquire about things from within the traditions about them rather than as some neutral observer or as a subject regarding an object. Such talk is unhelpful because not

only are we not subjects on this understanding but things are understood as traditions and so are never “objective” in that sense to begin with either.

HERMENEUTICS: By hermeneutics I mean the theory of interpretation. But by hermeneutics I also mean to suggest an understanding of life which is irredeemably “being-in-the-midst” and so, necessarily, *in need of* interpretation. Life is, thus “hermeneutical”, something in need of a theory of interpretation, an activity we do because we must. Hermeneutics is the attempt to understand how and why we interpret as part of our very being.

EXPERIENCE: Experience is a form of knowledge, social yet inevitably personal. It is, thus, a unique location for each one of us. This position, though “unique”, is commensurable to the extent that language is regarded as being a means of commensurability.

COMMUNITY: A community is any social grouping with the shared culture, values, experiences, language, etc., that go with it. It is imagined that any given human being may be a member, explicitly or implicitly, of several communities with all the advantages and disadvantages of shared knowledge, attitudes, outlooks, etc., that that affords.

UNDERSTANDING: Understanding I think of as a temporary “safe space” one might imagine on an intellectual journey. Imagine yourself to be walking along a narrow path on a steep mountainside. To one side is the sheer rock face, to the other is a drop off into nowhere. Then you find a little nook in the rock where you can rest without fear of danger, your questions and concerns assuaged for the time being. That, in an intellectual

sense, is how I conceive of understanding. It is an answering of all the questions you have for now and a feeling of satisfaction and resolution at where you currently happen to be. Of course, further movement on your intellectual journey will likely rattle this understanding. But, no doubt, further “nooks” will be available further on down the path as well.

SIGNS: Signs, or signifiers, are what make up languages. They are tools for communicating with other people which, if used appropriately in the context of and in relation to other signs, have the ability to communicate information or meaning or understanding.

LANGUAGE: Language is that in which human beings are submerged or by which they are inundated. It is social in origin and operation and so beyond any individual’s strict control since they neither invented its signs nor its rules of operation. Language is, thus, a “working with what you’ve got” or a “being-in-the-midst” *par excellence* and, in the context of language, we are all both readers and writers using the creativity that we have a capacity for and the notion of “play” to “play the game” of being language-users. Yet it is not we that take hold of language, rather, language takes hold of us that use it. We must become participants in its world (with only the rights and abilities of participants), a world that is not ours. Language is our means to both meaning and understanding but it is important to recognise that there is no non-linguistic version of either to find behind language. In these strict senses, there is no “outside-language”. It is in this sense that I take Gadamer’s statement that “Being that is understood is language” or Heidegger’s that “Language is the house of being” or Wittgenstein’s that “The limits of my language means the limits of my world”.

NETWORK: Human beings have much to do with networks as a form of life. We may say that they are thrown into several networks as well as, mentally, being constituted as a network of thoughts themselves in their consciousness or mind. Examples of social networks would be language and culture. I think of human beings as constituted as nodes on a net (as opposed to individual subjects observing objects) as of first importance. We are networked “beings-in-the-midst” or a network of thoughts within other social networks.

WISDOM: In my hermeneutical philosophy wisdom, a practical knowing how to live, how to be human, how to read (which means how to interpret), with a sensitivity to and awareness of our “being-in-the-midstness”, is our goal.

NEGOTIATION: Negotiation is important in my philosophy as a term which describes how we operate as participants playing games. Thus, it is indicative of a sense of give and take within the games which are not conceived of as fixed or static but as things during which participants may come to agreements or as things plastic and malleable as when a referee may wave “play on” rather than call a foul. (Interpretation and a wise sense for the whole and the parts and their relationship is here important.)

INTERPRETATION: Interpretation is the self-reflexive activity of reading, understanding and making meaning from our being-in-the-midst of traditions, of language, of communities. It is not what we do: it is what we are. In the beginning was the interpretation and it has been ever since.

BEING: Being is a "somethingness-in-the-midst", a sense of, and need for, relationship to the environment.

EDUCATION: Education is an attitude, a form of being, a form of being which sees the need to keep becoming something else. It is a feeding at the level of thought which enables growth.

FICTION: Fiction is the lie which tells the truth. To understand a fiction is to know what truth it wants to tell and to understand *how* it means. Fiction is not a matter of intentional proposition but of intuitive sensibility. Fiction is, in this sense, a hermeneutical act. Fiction is a collusion with the world of our experience for the creation of meaningful interpretations.

ENQUIRY: Enquiry is a targeted act of interpretation, a deliberate activity of entangling ourselves in traditions of certain chosen kinds.

In giving these descriptions of certain chosen words I am, *of course*, not giving *closed* descriptions. They remain, for me at least, radically open and subject to constant revision. Neither am I giving a narrative of my philosophical outlook or attempting to, necessarily and coherently, marry up all these descriptions so that they fit tidily in, and as, some complete narrative. I will be honest and admit that I am suspicious of those who claim to give descriptions that explain everything with, seemingly, no loose ends. I certainly myself cannot do it and so I wonder how others perhaps imagine that they can. For me, aporia are all around and questioning, doubt and simple unknowing are staples of my own experience of life and my own being-in-the-midst. In fact, you will notice that

words like truth or knowledge or fact are not amongst my “good words” and that perhaps tells its own story too. My own life, in terms of philosophy, thought and enquiry as in most other ways, has been much more a matter of “this works, let’s pursue it until a problem occurs that stops it working” than any secure pathways of knowledge or guiding “absolute truths”. (Of course, if that something did stop working then a new thing that did work would need to be found or made to keep playing the game.) In fact, so mythical are these things I wonder if they even exist. So I am inherently skeptical of knowledge claims, dubious about “the truth” and, consequently, seduced by the fiction of reality or, rather, the reality that is fiction. (The reality that is a hermeneutical act.)

So to decipher “what has been going on here” one needs to play the game of understanding, a game I see as hermeneutical, a matter of interpretation, and to ask how understanding and meaning-making are here taking place. It will be seen that people generally have very different views on this so it is not surprising their conclusions are also different. For example, at least two of the authors I wrote about in the three chapters immediately above this one align themselves with something called “critical realism” which, as a type of realism, with its concomitant usage of talk about subjects and objects, is something that I just find inadequate and unnecessary. Such talk, for me, is literally unhelpful talk. But this is all a matter of conversation, another word I could have put in my “good words” but didn’t. For, in the end, conversation, or negotiation, a word I did use in my “good words”, is what it is all about. We are all beings-in-the-midst; beings-in-the-midst of language; beings-in-the-midst of culture(s); beings-in-the-midst of traditions; beings-in-the-midst of creation; beings-in-the-midst of interpretation(s). For me the conversations that we have should primarily be about gaining wisdom and not knowledge. In enquiry, both general and specifically academic, I am not especially

wanting to know things (because I think that “knowing”, epistemologically conceived, is somewhat beyond a human being’s pay grade) but to open myself up to being able to imagine both more and differently.

This may sound strange, almost perverse. But I value the ability to have facility with the conversation about things over making egocentric claims about specific items in that conversation. Remember, it is play, a game. Knowing how to play the game, how to be a better participant, trumps any one move. Understanding, wisdom, imagination, is much more important than knowledge claims, particularly those as understood as coming from within a kind of talk that I personally find not remotely convincing. Knowledge, for me, should be a lowercase kind of knowledge which fuels and facilitates wisdom rather than an end in itself. An objective knowledge that inhabits a realist, essentialist, foundationalist world is, for me, an example of a kind of talk that needs to be phased out because it strikes me as brash and inauthentic. The important question for me is not “Have we got it right?” but “Where do we want to go?” or “What can we use this for?” or “What are you trying to say?” Human purposes, and better human purposes than we have now, should dominate over a rhetorical agenda of “matching up facts to reality” or “knowing the truth”. Those latter questions are, for me, ways of talking that haven’t worked out. I also regard them as *rhetorical claims* rather than demonstrated facts. In fact, as I see things, when people say they are “matching up facts to reality” I take them to mean, whether they believe it or not, that they are simply saying “Where do we want to go?” or “What can we use this for?” but under cover of another as yet unseen and unidentified agenda. This is what I take Dale Allison, James Dunn and Tom Wright to be doing in this book in my various analyses.

This also explains the hermeneutic of suspicion that I have used towards the ancient textual sources and the more contemporary historical Jesus books that I have critiqued throughout my books and essays, not least in my last three chapters here. I did not take it as my task to simply accept their narratives as given. I did not think that their first readings of their texts held any authority for me that I was bound to follow. Instead, I assumed, rightly, that they were all very interested in selling me something that I may, or may not, have wanted to buy. Whether, in fact, I did buy it was a matter for me and not them. The reader is a writer, remember? This is the act of negotiation in playing the game of reading texts. But there was even more to it than this for each book that was studied here was an enquiry itself. Each author posed questions in their texts of the past. But what I find important in such questions is that *the answer is not known in advance*. Yet, in each case here, it seemed to me, to a greater or lesser degree, as if each author seemed to know where they needed to be at the end. The questions, to my mind, were not asked as genuine questions. In an authentic act of questioning the questioner finds themselves questioned by the questions they ask and the questions are themselves genuine, existential explorations of their being-in-the-midst. However, in the main, my reading of these books revealed people who asked questions the answers to which, in some senses, they knew already so that I ask myself to what extent any real enquiry was really going on in their researches at all.

I do not mean to be harsh or personal in saying that. It is simply my impression of the texts as read from my own position as an interpreter of their texts. Neither do I mean to suggest that in the researches they undertook they did not broaden their (and our) own understandings or learn new things. In fact, I'm sure they did. But none of this removes the question from in front of any enquirer: how much are these questions that I ask

questions that put me myself and my being-in-the-midst in question? The alternative is to ask how much these questions that we ask are for the rhetorical purposes of propping up assumptions (or conclusions) which we do not question at all. We all have these and I do not mean to single out the authors whose books I have critiqued here for that. For me, this is indicative of the fact that, so to speak, “language comes after the fact” by which I mean to say that linguistic understanding and explanation always comes after the fact of things we intuit beforehand. I can put this very simply as this chapter is an example of it in writing. The question is “How do I know what I think?” and its answer is “I will not know until I write it down.” But, having written it down, it then becomes part of tradition, a part of the stream of things that I have thought. It will form a part of my pre-understanding should I come back to look at these things again. But it is not destined to last and neither was it made for that purpose. Thought, philosophies, ideas, they are always a matter of “for now” and never “forever”. New times and new situations will, of necessity, require new tools and new ideas better fitted for contemporary scenarios. The past, in this sense, cannot be held in thought which is just one reason why the interpretation of canonical texts is forever changing and there is a subject called “the history of interpretation”. *So gospels cannot mean for us what they meant for their first readers. That is not how reading, which is also writing and interpreting, works.*

Instead, this reading/writing, this interpreting in hermeneutic context, is a matter of a mutual questioning between text and context and reader/writers, a play of being-in-the-midsts that is rhizomatic in every sense. Some, such as James Dunn, as we saw earlier, may regard this as a counsel of despair, the end of communication, the unnecessary complication of things he wishes were simple, determinative and direct. But, as I see these same things, it is the only way to *enable* communication. For me this does not

provide a lack of meaning but a superfluity of it. Language inundates us with possibility; it does not imprison us in static choices. For it is only in the context of play in a game or of relationship within a system or network that things begin to mean or a facility to develop an understanding of the (possible) relationships between things begins to happen at all. But these are not fixed, they are not “oughts” and they are not a mapping of realities or correspondences to things not linguistically conceived; they are not representations in sounds or markings of things that contain their own meanings elsewhere or extra-linguistically. Nothing speaks for itself. It is, rather, SPOKEN FOR.

This is why my twenty fourth “good word”, if I may be allowed to add one more, is *rhetoric*. Rhetoric, for me, functions much as fiction did when I referred it to gospels or historical Jesus books. It is a word that speaks about testimony or witness, a word which indicates what is seen as a “being true” or functions as such in the world of lived experience. Rhetoric is speaking truth in a way that is observed to work in certain circumstances and that is all it has to recommend it. It is practical and pragmatic. It works, it functions, it is that anything which can be made to go and so goes. Rhetoric is positionality, interpretation and ideology writ large. It is not metaphysical or epistemological, it is not “real” and it doesn’t claim to be “the way things are” - and not least it doesn’t claim this even when, rhetorically, it is claimed to do exactly that! Rhetoric is a kind of talk, a claim of importance from some node in the network, a way of meaning-making and understanding-creating, a way of relating some being-in-the-midst.

Rhetoric, in the final analysis, is all we have.

POSTSCRIPT

"Humans do not sort through every possible mathematical combination of a complex series of 0s and 1s until they finally hit the right one. They interpret." - John D. Caputo

14. “Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean” and “the religious figure, Jesus Christ”

The American comedian, Rich Hall, had a show in 2009 called “Hell No, I Ain’t Happy”. I mention it because, hell no, I ain’t happy. In fact, I find it hard to believe I’ll ever be happy and, up until this point at which, as I write, I am approaching the age of one half century old, I never have been happy as a settled state. I’ve been concentrating on trying to stay sane although I’m not sure why as being insane would at least relieve me of the burden of being concerned about it either way. In fact, were it not for brief moments of happiness that had strayed way off course and found themselves populating my hellhole of an existence, I would easily be able to believe that happiness is a myth told to to keep us compliant and hopeful.

The British comedian, Stewart Lee, likes to play a character on stage that he refers to in mock interviews and real ones as “the comedian Stewart Lee” and this character is a version of Stewart Lee himself yet, in Lee’s mind, at least, a rhetorically distinguishable version. This version of Lee does comedy exclusively for “an insular cadre of socially challenged, middle aged men” although, as Lee notes as part of his act, to laughter, not as exclusively as he’d like. Indeed, in a more recent show than the one from which this anecdote is taken, the comedian Stewart Lee goes on to say that his ideal room is a completely sold out empty room. He’s got the money, because people have bought the tickets, but he doesn’t have to do the work of bringing them round or appealing to their comedic sensitivities.

I wonder how the American comedian, Louis CK, feels about this. CK is now most famous for deciding it would be a good idea to masturbate in front of women, sometimes asking permission and sometimes not. It seems it never occurred to him to say that it was “the

comedian Louis CK” doing these things. As I write, he recently made what is being reported as a come back appearance at a New York comedy venue only for lots of women to complain in public on the Internet that the disgraced Mexican-American should actually have just disappeared forever. These women, it seems, do not believe that CK has yet suffered enough for the crime of exposing a few inches of flesh in the wrong circumstances. The thought begins to dawn on me that, perhaps, they wish he would just go and hide in a corner and, to all intents and purposes, cease to exist as a public individual.

One wonders how the fourth century BCE Cynic, Diogenes of Sinope, would feel about this. Diogenes, so we learn from historical anecdotes, would masturbate openly in public and then remark that he wished it was so easy to fulfill the desire of hunger as it was to fulfill the sexual desire. A little rub and its gone away until next time. Yet Diogenes would be in jail if he were here today, a pariah and a target of outraged feminist critique, and all because he was dealing as simply as possible with the sexual urge where someone else might see it. But what else could he do, masturbate furiously in his barrel? Diogenes, of course, might have replied to the effect that it is no big deal. Sex is natural and not shameful. Seeing an animal ejaculate is nothing to be frightened of or outraged about just like when your dog licks its embarrassing erection yet, strangely, does not appear remotely embarrassed. At best, it is perhaps something to laugh at, dismissively. Diogenes was a Cynic which means that he thought nothing natural could be a source of shame. His enemy was cultural prescription, the artificiality of human beings who codify and make rules for things that take human society away from living “according to nature” in general.

And now, in my fifth paragraph, I come to my fifth man. That man is Jesus, alternatively known as Christ, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Lord, Jesus of Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth,

Jesus H Christ and Jesus, the carpenter's son. There is no record of the King of Kings ever having masturbated in public, although it seems he did get heckled from time to time, and there is that one saying about chopping your balls off if you are up to it. Yet he did not speak about "the religious figure, Jesus Christ" and neither did he ever say he was happy. But this, it turns out, is not something he could have done anyway because Jesus was not a writer. He did not write and perhaps, most likely, could not have written if he had wanted to anyway. Jesus was almost certainly illiterate. When we bring together the notions of Jesus and writing it is always someone else's writing about Jesus and never Jesus' writing about Jesus. Jesus, most likely, did not have the ability or the will to present himself in writing and so it was left up to others, often people Jesus didn't even know, to write about him instead. Which of us would be happy with that? The religious figure, Jesus Christ, might be happy with that. He has gone on to have the biggest career of all time. But what about Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean?

It strikes me that Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean might be mortified by the career that the religious figure, Jesus Christ, is having. He would, it seems to me, more than likely be banging his head against the wall of his carpenter's shop shouting "Make it stop!" if it weren't for the unfortunate fact that he is dead. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean, did not ask to be brought into the White House, the seat of American presidential power, and used as a totem or a proxy for policies of any kind of modern partisanship. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean, did not share some bread and fish with some people so that guys wearing pillow cases on their heads could express their hatred for Jews and blacks. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean was a Jew (and, in all likelihood, not exactly white), unlike the religious figure, Jesus Christ, who was a white, European-looking fellow and so obviously not a Jew. The religious figure, Jesus Christ, was more the Jesus who would be happy to be at

a right wing rally where the supremacy of the white race could be reasonably discussed and promulgated. As the whitest person in history, the religious figure, Jesus Christ, fits right in there. But not Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean. Stupid Jew. Literally.

Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean was not a modern, white, evangelical businessman. He did not have family values. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean said, "The person who does not hate father and mother cannot become a disciple of mine." He also said, "If you have money, do not give it at interest. Instead, give it to someone from whom you won't get it back." He said that people have nowhere to lay their heads and that people should "Become passersby". Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean was fucking insane. He would not have been accepted into your cosy, well-funded church on Sunday. He would have been chased from the door had he even showed up. He had literally nothing to say about homosexuality, abortion clinics or making America great, either again or at all. He would wonder why there were bishops who had thrones in cathedrals and lived in palaces. But not the religious figure, Jesus Christ. He gets that. In fact, he wants you to hang his portrait up in the palace and have a statue of him in the cathedral. And please use his name as much as possible to justify whatever it is you want to do today. Even if its genocide.

At this point I should apologise to any female readers because, even though Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean may have recommended chopping off your balls for the kingdom of God, he was still a man. Very much a man. You don't see any female carpenters now do you? And the religious figure, Jesus Christ, is basically a huge, shiny penis being waved in your face, Louis CK stylee. The religious figure, Jesus Christ, is the very appendage of life. He wants you to eat him. He insists. So this is a very man-centred essay about a very manly subject. God is not a woman, OK? That's just a fact

you'll have to get used to down at the Women's Rights Centre as you discuss the tax on tampons and misogyny in the computer games industry. So, ladies, if you please, the men are talking about men here. It would serve you well to watch, listen, learn and, fundamentally, know your place. Oh, I know that some churches have female priests and even bishops now but, come on, all the proper churches don't, the ones that actually have eaten the big, shiny dick of the religious figure, Jesus Christ.

Now Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean, was a poor man. I mean really poor. Destitute, in fact. And he really disliked people who weren't poor. He would have hated rich men in suits crowdfunding their campaigns to be congressmen and senators whilst greedily snuffling at the trough of corporate endorsement. (You may wonder why I keep referring this essay to American things when I am British but this is obviously because America is the most important country in the world in every respect.... For those reading this who are unaware of the British comedian, Stewart Lee, I don't think that. I think the opposite of that.) He would have despised CEOs of multi-national companies outsourcing their work to some third world cesspool where people work knee deep in their own excrement for 22 hours a day, not allowed to even go and relieve themselves elsewhere because it might slow down production and reduce the profit margin by 0.0000000000001%. So, this being true, isn't it somewhat perverse that the religious figure, Jesus Christ, is exactly a friend of all the slimy sons of bitches that Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean never would be? How the hell did that happen?

It turns out that this is what happens when Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean does not write his own PR material. Then what happens is that bozos turn up later who don't particularly see the advantages of Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean, who likes the poor and encourages everyone else to become it by

giving all their money away, but do see the advantages of someone called the religious figure, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, as British motoring buffoon, Jeremy Clarkson, likes to call himself (shouldn't that be "JC"?), is many times more preferable because, since he never actually ever existed, much like "the comedian, Stewart Lee," you can actually say pretty much anything you like about him. He is what feminists like to call "a rhetorical construct" and so is very much like "toxic masculinity". The best thing about being a rhetorical construct is that you can get away with saying anything because you will always be able to fall back on the notion that what you are talking about never really existed. Of course, you should never actually say that because the whole point of the religious figure, Jesus Christ, is that you maintain to the utmost of your ability that he does exist. But, of course, he doesn't really. Just never say that out loud.

All this would have flown over the head of Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean though. He was not up on feminist discourse. He wasn't interested in corporate endorsements. He couldn't even write his name. And he didn't want to. He just got his hammer and chisel and chopped at bits of wood. Sometimes he wandered about and ate food with people. Like a mug. He talked about the kingdom of God and said it was like a weed that infests your garden and draws in birds who will eat all your seed. Then he said it was like mould you put in bread that infects all the bread and makes it rise. Was he off his nut? What is this gibberish? No wonder you never find his picture in palaces or his statue in cathedrals. The religious figure, Jesus Christ, is much more suitable to the task of being our cultural battering ram for all the things that we think but that we can say that he really stood for. Rhetorical construct, remember that.

The religious figure, Jesus Christ, does not mind this because he gets a throne at God's right hand and he appreciates that kinda thing. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean, said he had nowhere to lay his head and, apparently, wandered about

the countryside like some kind of tramp. That message will not play well with the upwardly mobile demographic that we are aiming for as they try to not default on their mortgages and upgrade to the next model of car whilst saving for the newest iPhone. We do not want people to find nobility and blessing in their pathetic lives, much less meaning. We want them to imagine that they can have something better... but not right now. After death. Right now you have to give us all of your money and suffer. Suffering is good. Look, the religious figure, Jesus Christ, suffered. He was crucified, for God's sake. (Yes, literally.) But he has a throne now. Geddit? Suffer now, throne later. Right now you have to hate homos, baby killers, people who vote left, cross-dressing sex perverts and anyone who hasn't got a gun. Its what the religious figure, Jesus Christ, would have wanted. You know he's in charge upstairs, right? How do you think things will work out for you if you get there and you have all the wrong views? "No one comes to the Father except through me," OK?

So forget this dope Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean. Forget the poor. Forget giving all your money away, hating mom and dad, loving your enemies, being merciful, not judging, taking the log out of your own eye, and that parable where the king invites everyone to the banquet, "both good and bad alike". As if! That is all terrible stuff, literally the opposite of the good life in today's world. If you want a good life then you need the religious figure, Jesus Christ. He hates immoral people and is going to burn them all... and you need never look in the mirror with him. He only bothers about the bad people and not us good ones. And remember, Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean was a vagrant and can you trust vagrants? No, you can't. We arrest vagrants. Just for being vagrants! Vagrants are morally culpable simply for their vagrancy which is a kind of social marker for immorality. Any decent person has their own home. Diogenes was a vagrant and he masturbated in public. Like Louis CK. But the religious figure, Jesus Christ, never once so much as touched his own penis. In fact, he

was asexual. Never had a single sexual thought. His mind was pure. He never even had an erection because he was too busy thinking about being good and burning the immoral who have far too many erections. And that's just the feminist lesbians! So would you really choose Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean over the religious figure, Jesus Christ? Its your ass on the line here.

You never realised all this was at stake really, did you? But there is a reason that God speaks through the religious figure, Jesus Christ, and not the leftist conspiracy fabrication that is Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean. That reason is that God has moral values. God, who is white, knows the value and righteousness of good, white values, of making money, looking after yourself, your family and friends to the detriment of all others whilst bearing arms as a God-given right. That's why we know that the Jews who killed Jesus are not going to heaven, because the religious figure, Jesus Christ, says so. Remember, the religious figure, Jesus Christ, is alive. He rose from the dead on the third day just like the four holy gospels (who were written by four trustworthy white men) say. But this Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean, he died. He died like a dog on a cross and no one knows what they did to him. Probably eaten by dogs or dumped in a pile of bodies with his face in someone's ass. Do you want to be associated with that? Do you want to follow assface and wonder around like a tramp spouting parables about seeds or do you want a throne in heaven whilst all the bad people get the hellfire they deserve?

Hell no, you ain't happy now, are you? Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean isn't looking so good now. He's almost a masturbator, that vagrant bastard. You can't trust anyone who hasn't got a home, right? They are dangerous. Their vagrancy might be catching. Do you know, he even advised his followers to go knocking on doors so that they might get food? This is why the religious figure, Jesus Christ, asks us to live in gated

communities so that we can keep scum like that out. You never know where the hand that knocks on your door might have been. Best to see them stopped at the gate. By the security guard. Let them wipe the dust from their feet. See if I care. We don't need your fake news kingdom of God communist Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean. The religious figure, Jesus Christ, who is white unlike you, has our thrones ready for us in heaven. Which is also white. What's that? "Everyone who glorifies himself will be humiliated, and the one who humbles himself will be praised?" Listen, Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean. I am white, the religious figure, Jesus Christ, is white and God is white. If you think I'm living like a tramp in the dirt, relying on whatever I can find to eat and mixing with those who can, at best, be described as immoral undesirables, then you are very much mistaken.

Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean made a mistake. He left his PR to other people and now other people prefer the religious figure, Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean is now fake news, a commie Christ, a socialist masturbator's wet dream. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean wishes now that he had learnt to write as he lies, mouldering, in an unmarked grave with his denuded face in someone's bony ass. He cannot believe that he left the job to the four white guys, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They seemed trustworthy at the time but instead of repeating what he said they made up stories and sexed it up until they had the religious figure, Jesus Christ, instead. Weren't they listening? Which bit of "blessed are the poor" did they not get? Instead, they went with the whole "son of God" angle as if Jesus was a white guy. They went chasing after Roman approval as if pleasing those in charge was what mattered most. Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean never said that big organisations should be created with people living in palaces. He never endorsed telethons to fund churches or expected the pastor to live in a mansion. Which bit of "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes

to be first among you must become slave of all” did they not get? Jesus of Nazareth, the destitute, illiterate Galilean hunkered down in his unmarked grave, depressed. He wished he had learnt to write.

15. Jesus as Text

"You don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened." -
John Green, *An Abundance of Katherines*

This is a book about Jesus as a character in books. It is my contention that when he is written about in books he *is* a character and that, even though we may wish to relate these characters to a historical person, *how* we might do that and *how valid* such a procedure is are always matters about which we need to give a lot of thought. There can, in the 21st century, no longer be a continuance with the naive elision of literature and historicity as if one were the imprint of the other. This is as crass as it is deceptive. We need to gain ever more perceptive readerly faculties with which to honour and respect the literary arts at work in those books called "gospels" (as well as their 'narrative logic'), the very name of which speaks of "good news" and so is not meant to be 'journalism' or 'objective report' or 'the bald facts'. By calling something 'good news' one already signals up that one has an attitude towards, and an interpretive take upon, the contents of the literary product.

It is not only my intuition that many gospel readers are not always so perceptive but I also have first hand experience of it as someone who, once upon a time, sat in churches and classrooms and houses with those who called themselves Christians. The reading that I experienced in such places was perfunctory at best and more often than not completely uninformed. The gospels (and only those inside the New Testament, of course) were read there for the 'feel good' meaning that a modern reader might be able to take away from the text over coffee without knowing anything about it except a naive English sense of the sentences read. There was, and I assume still is, no willingness or

ability in such places to try and tie the text down to a historical point of origin and to ask oneself what a writer writing the text or a first reader reading or hearing the text might want or be able to understand by what has been said. Indeed, any idea that you might need to educate yourself in some way to be able to read appropriately was either unthinkingly lacking or dogmatically put to one side as the 'plain sense' should be something that anyone can understand according to some Christian dogma about the Bible itself. I, as then a person in their twenties who thought that if you were going to read something regarded as so important then you should at least try to educate yourself about it, was not very impressed and so I went to university to study biblical studies and I left the others to their own devices.

Now, half my lifetime later, I spend some of my time writing books about Jesus, the gospels and early Christian history. So far I have written five books and they have given a broad background to my views on Jesus as a historical person and the sources for finding him. So as I begin a book that is about books and only tangentially about history (for even as books they have a historical context) perhaps it is good for me to summarise where this book is situated itself in terms of what I have already written about Jesus and the gospels. There now follows a very brief and selective set of summary points of what I have *already* said and which you can read about in a lot more detail in the previous essays in this book:

1. Gospels are fictions because human beings understand things by 'fictionalising' them. This is a matter of what works, what the world will allow you to think, and not of 'what is'. As such, this would be exemplified by Nietzsche's aphoristic formulation that "what can be thought of must certainly be a fiction".

2. Accordingly, Jesus has been fictionalised from the first and not just in sources I might find dubious but in *all the sources*. There is no fictionless point of view.

3. Academic study of Jesus, as some imagined scientific-objective route to the Jesus of history, is largely an illusion. It has few genuinely useful controls even while it does have certain standard methods. At the end of the day, its results are still tied to the scholar/s concerned in ways as determinative as any evidence they imagine to present. The bald truth here is that we know so little that certainty about most things would seem beyond us. If this be disputed then you may ask yourself why so many differing versions of Jesus, from ones faithful to every line of the New Testament to those in complete contradiction with the same, and even to him not existing at all, equally have academic backers with PhDs and a growing literature of their own in every case. Scholars agree about very little on Jesus and where they do it is usually on primarily confessional lines.

4. Historical study of Jesus is not about reading the gospels and believing them but about reading the gospels and being suspicious of them. One should not simply accept the story they want to tell, which is something with integrity in its own right, but must ask what story we might find *in and between them* that they don't tell. What's more, we can do this quite legitimately if, as most think, Matthew and Luke can use sources *but still tell a differing story anyway*. This is to say that we must always remember that gospels tell *their* truth but not necessarily by telling *the* truth. It is also to remember that even if all your sources were 100% accurate you could still put them together in any way you wanted to make a story of your own *and this would make a difference*.

5. No one was checking the gospels for historical accuracy as they were written. More to the point, it would be the characters produced in them that were the things to be measured against valid conceptions of those same characters in the communities that read them. All is and was relative.

6. As an example of the literary mindset of gospels we may say, with David Friedrich Strauss, that if any given writer thinks Jesus is the Messiah then any and all messianic things must naturally apply to him. This, in turn, is to say that the outlook and thought world of those concerned with gospels will have a determinative effect upon the shape of the material produced.

7. Jesus is presented in far more ways than one in ancient gospel literature. The hallmark of that literature is as much diversity as it is uniformity.

8. Interpretations rather than facts are basic to gospel literature. It is the interpretations that determine the character of the Jesuses presented.

9. Gospels are sites of polemic and rhetoric, controversy and ideology. Whatever else they are, they are not texts which remain neutral about their contents. As such, they invite readers to either agree with them or reject them (like parables, in fact).

10. Jesus was a mixture of Cynic and prophet, a Jewish Diogenes crossed with Elijah. His interests I designate as 'Cynic eschatology', a disaffection with the regular commercialised world, something he looked forward to a reversal of in the incoming kingdom of God. This would affect everything from family relationships to who ruled the

land and would result in living directly under the rule of God without any mediation by human culture or civilisation. (See my last chapter for more on this!)

11. Jesus was not self-referential and did not see himself as personally important to the kingdom of God. There the 'of God' is the important part not anything Jesus thought or might be imagined to do, or have done, or be, himself.

12. There is no 'Gospel According to Jesus'. Nor will there ever be.

13. When it comes to Jesus and the gospels, in an authentic act of questioning the questioner finds themselves questioned by the questions they ask and the questions are themselves genuine, existential explorations of their being-in-the-midst of the issues they concern themselves with.

These points, without regurgitating the hundreds of thousands of words I have so far used to substantiate them across previous books and essays, are a fair summary of where I am now. They set out, in a very concise form, my views on Jesus, on the gospels, and on reading the gospels. It will be seen that I take up some quite distinctive positions towards all of these things and I hope to continue that here as I come to address Jesus as/in texts. This, of course, was always something that I was going to have to address if I was to be as complete as possible in my discussion of Jesus and it is, likewise, no less a polemical subject to address. This is because to call Jesus a *character* in a text is to formally distinguish him from a historical person who existed in Galilee and elsewhere in the First Century CE. This is not something that every gospel reader would like to do but

it is something that I regard us as having to do. The Jesus you find in a book is not the Jesus you might have met in the street.

And it is quite naive to think he would be. Indeed, one wonders what the people who do this actually think they are doing. One wonders how they think or imagine that they can go from street to text in such a direct way without any kind of interpretation or translation necessary. It is, I think, a very common delusion to imagine that if I, as a writer, take a collection of facts or a string of sayings or a selection of events and put them together in some order of my own making that I have, thereby, recreated a real person from the real world in the pages of a text of my own making. However, it seems to go unnoticed in this process that I, as writer, have missed out, either deliberately or by overlooking them, all the details and circumstances of the events or sayings that I report. In so doing, I create a completely new scene of my own making that is under my control and input into it the meanings, connections and relationships that I want but that were not present in the original concatenation of events. *Reality cannot be reproduced on the page but it can be manufactured artificially.* All I am left with is my own fiction of that reality, my own creation of a new literary reality that is in some indistinct relationship to the one I was trying to report. Thus, no Jesus in gospel literature is the actual Jesus and all Jesuses in gospel literature are fictional Jesuses, creations of literary characters that are avatars for that reality that we are trying to represent on the page. Here the best we can do is ask ourselves how our literary creations might relate to or interact with the real relationships that are evident in the real world. However, even in doing this we must be mindful that this is a process which is thoroughly interpretational, a matter of interpretation all the way down. However we try to understand Jesus we will never escape the matter of hermeneutics and the matter of

interpretation. It will always remain the case that to write is to interpret and to read is to interpret.

Gospels, then, are *fiction* and this is basic, something we must understand before we can go on. They are texts which tell the truth but not necessarily by telling the truth. So here I can reassert once more, as I did in a previous book, that there is now no non-interpreted Jesus, no non-rhetorical Jesus, and no non-fictional Jesus. All gospel writers have created equally and all we are actually arguing about is which is the better or more appropriate one from our point of view. In gospels, Jesus is in receipt of a textual body constructed from words. These words are written by writers for their own agendas in conjunction with audiences, imagined or otherwise, for whom they write and whose responses they anticipate in writing about their subjects. Here, whether in the narrative gospels of the New Testament or the sayings gospels that we find outside the New Testament, all their writers alike create thought worlds and plug into and make use of ideas from their contemporary situations. They use and reuse contexts that are known to them and, by means of them, they create the Jesus that is to be found within their own textual creations. We can truly speak of these Jesuses as literary creations rather than representations of some real Jesus that it is imagined exists in the real world since, in reality, these Jesuses, too, are only other fictions we have placed somewhere else than on the written page. Once more we must insist that all is interpretation and this is inescapable. There is, neither in books nor in actuality, a non-interpreted Jesus to find.

It will serve readers well to keep this in mind as they progress through the pages of this book.

16. The Historical Jesus as an Art

We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*. - Friedrich Nietzsche

Step back in time, if you will, to the late 18th century. Imagine that you are still, at this time, the kind of person who has an interest in the gospels and the historical Jesus such as, presumably, you must be if you are reading this book. Immediately, we hit a problem in our fantasy for the idea of “the historical Jesus” would have been hard to imagine or conceive of at this time. “The historical Jesus” didn’t really exist in the late 18th century and there was a very good reason for this: it was naively and completely assumed by almost everyone, layman and scholar alike, that Jesus simply was the person in the gospels. If you wanted to know the history of Jesus you read the gospels. There was no other Jesus. There was no “Christ of faith” or “historical Jesus” and there was none because the only Jesus to even be conceived of was the one in the fourfold gospel witness of the New Testament. Hermann Samuel Reimarus, anonymously at first, demurred from this point of view and, according to John Kloppenborg, “successfully showed that the differences among the gospel accounts were of such a quality that harmonizing was intellectually indefensible.” But it is a measure of how deep set this view was, and how scandalous it would be to disagree with it, that he effectively had to disagree with it in secret, said secret only coming out after his death due to G.E. Lessing, to whom he had entrusted it. Reimarus was someone who wanted to distinguish between a “Jesus of the gospels” and a “Jesus of history”. He, at least, could conceive that between those two there might be a difference and he wasn’t prepared to stomach the stubbornness of the church and its scholars that there was no difference there to find. Indeed, who but those happy in their fundamentalism would think such a thing today?

Continuing in our historical fantasy for a few moments more we would find other things somewhat different to our present time as well. For example, which was the first gospel to be written? Today, many would plump for Mark but back then you might have been more likely to get the answer of Matthew for the idea of Markan Priority had not yet been invented. But, thinking further about Matthew, what about those portions of it which seem to be in common with similar portions in Luke but aren't from Mark? Today many scholars would call this material "Q" and locate it to a further source that Matthew and Luke had in common. But no one would have done this in the late 18th century for, besides Mark not yet having priority, it seems that few had even noticed such portions common to Matthew and Luke in the first place! Q would have to wait several decades after this to even be seriously suggested and entertained. Yet when things like Markan Priority and Q did come along these self-same scholars of the church, the ones who would have been upset by Reimarus' impudence, would be the ones fighting tooth and nail to preserve their traditional understandings and "old time religion" in the face of the modernity and contemporaneity of new insights and different points of view. In truth, such scholars have always done this because, as Albert Schweitzer said of both Reimarus and his fellow traveller of a few years later, David Friedrich Strauss, it has often been the impious and impudent who have advanced the properly academic study of Jesus rather than the pious. One, indeed, need not look to the pious for such hard-nosed honesty. Their job, it seems, is always entirely apologetic and they are unable to get past their own faith commitments. They fight any advance in knowledge tooth and nail and entirely in the cause of the preservation of dogma.

But it was, of course, ever thus. Historical Jesus and gospel study is carried out in an academic sense by only some few thousands of people in the whole world. A goodly

number of these people are Christians and a decent number of those do their study in faith establishments and, in a number of cases, in faith establishments where you must sign documents promising not to contravene dogmatic truths in your so-called “academic” work. In modern times of liberal education there are also others who study in academic establishments with no faith commitments but these are merely a few perhaps agnostic or even atheistic fish in a sea of Christian believers. What would we expect of such “scholarship” given the makeup of those who practice it? Would they be likely to question the death of Jesus as a genuine event as the gospels record it? Would they pour scorn on the notion that he was resurrected? Would they imagine the Bible that is their textbook to be a tissue of pious lies? Could we imagine that they might be judiciously objective in the carrying out of their professional and academic tasks? Might we be surprised to learn that such scholarship often seems to map very precisely along confessional lines? How can one take such a self-proclaimed “academic” subject seriously?

One does so, I suggest, by seeing it as an art. This, it must immediately be admitted, is not to see it as those pursuing it will themselves see it. It is part of this art that one creatively redescribes what it is that one is doing. This is an art that does not want to see itself as art and so it recreates itself as a science or as objective history or as commentating on “the facts”. It is, as an art, of course none of these things. As an art it is entirely creative rather than recreative, constructive rather than reconstructive and constitutive rather than reconstitutive. Artists create, they make, they manufacture, they fashion. They do not put back together and much less do they put back together what was there before. They are those who take the formless lump of potter’s clay and decide what it will be. They are artists and so they must create, they must imbue the clay

with all the desire inside them that exists to be released and so to act upon the world. In this I regard the scholars, those from the last 250 years who have turned their attentions to the Jesus of history and so, necessarily, to the gospels, as not much different to those who wrote the gospels. Modern day books that proclaim a "historical Jesus" are, in fact, little other than modern day gospels for contemporary believers and they share the same artistic impulses with those who wrote gospels. Here their will to art is very much a will to create, a will to give the potter's clay form and shape, a form and shape which will for them be content, content that is to be willed the truth.

This art is necessarily a lover's art. As a lover's art it transforms, it transmutes, it transfigures that which is the object of its desire - just, in fact, as the lover transforms their beloved so that their faults do not matter anymore, their character, personality and foibles become objects of desire, we become enraptured by things that, in abstract isolation, might be annoyances or dislikes or pet peeves. Indeed, were we to at once fall out of love, as sometimes happens, they would immediately become exactly this - thus showing that they were never able to arbitrate what they were to begin with but were prey to our will to creation. Yet when they are aspects of a beloved the lover reshapes themselves and accommodates them, they create a world they can live and profitably exist within in tandem with their beloved. What might have been, in other circumstances, at odds with them is now a charm, a dream, a necessity; it becomes beautiful and, as beautiful, necessarily good. This is all because, when we love something, or, *au contraire*, when we hate it, we change it, we create it, we idealise it. It becomes for us an object of desire and, our desire being satiated by it, we cannot but find fulfillment and nourishment in our creating of it which is, in fact, what constitutes it in the first place. We are, consequently, in a sense only revelling in the feeling of our creating power, in a

feeling of intoxication which stimulates our senses as that we conceive of as the object of our love (or hate) is moulded by our fashioning hands into that which we can love, into our ideal of love. The beloved is necessarily beautiful - and it must be made so.

It is in such a feeling of intoxication that love and art meet for both are necessarily creative and, inasmuch as they are about such an intoxicating feeling, they are both physiological in origin. Now:

"Do you desire the most astonishing proof of how far the transfiguring power of intoxication can go?— 'Love' Is this proof: that which is called love in all the languages and silences of the world. In this case intoxication has done with reality to such a degree that in the consciousness of the lover the cause of it is extinguished and something else seems to have taken its place— a vibration and glittering of all the magic mirrors of Circe—

Here it makes no difference whether one is man or animal; even less whether one has spirit, goodness, integrity. If one is subtle, one is fooled subtly; if one is coarse, one is fooled coarsely; but love, and even the love of God, the saintly love of 'redeemed souls,' remains the same in its roots: a fever that has good reason to transfigure itself, an intoxication that does well to lie about itself— And in any case, one lies well when one loves, about oneself and to oneself: one seems to oneself transfigured, stronger, richer, more perfect, one is more perfect— Here we discover art as an organic function: we discover it in the most angelic instinct, 'love' ; we discover it as the greatest stimulus of life— art thus sublimely expedient even when it lies—

But we should do wrong if we stopped with its power to lie: it does more than merely imagine; it even transposes values. And it is not only that it transposes the feeling of values: the lover is more valuable, is stronger."

This, of course, comes from Nietzsche, and specifically from his notebooks in notes arranged around his notion of "the will to power as art". Art, creation, we may not altogether incorrectly see as Nietzsche's principle form of salvation. In writing on his "principles of a new evaluation" of human values he begins this section of notes on the will to power as art by saying "Our religion, morality, and philosophy are decadence forms of man. The countermovement: art" and then, in a sometimes bland but occasionally remarkable series of notes, he proceeds to eulogize art as that practice in which human beings are at their most vital and life-preserving, if not to say life-honouring. In this feeling of artistic intoxication our feeling for life is most intimately felt, experienced and, just as importantly, *exercised* - for life is a matter of existing, of becoming, of creating, of living in a world in which one can live - and so, necessarily, *of practice*. Thus, art, as with love, is a liar's self-deceptive practice in which one falsifies with the only truly good intent one could have, the intent to prosper one's own life, the intent to create a world in which one can exist. Indeed, Nietzsche can imagine the individual artist as but a stage on the way to something else in this: "The world as a work of art that gives birth to itself." In the lover's creating which is art the human being thus stimulates their own excitation with life and their desire to be in love with it, something which necessitates creating that with which they can be in love. *The lover's art creates.*

Nietzsche praises such artists for they have loved life, something which for Nietzsche was one of his own highest values and something which he would criticise gospel writers

and Christians generally for polluting and defaming by making *this life* of physiology, biology, change, decay, becoming and interpretation something base, sinful and in need of redemption, something to be despised and put behind oneself. Yet in the creation of gospels, and in the creation of modern “historical Jesus gospels”, it is my contention that we see something of the creative, loving artist of which Nietzsche speaks, albeit with content that he would not necessarily have been in favour of at all. For it is in such creative endeavours that those who have taken part in them have attempted to create that which they can love, that which justifies their own lives and makes that life something that they themselves can love. Here we should not shy away either from Nietzsche’s notion that the loving artist is a liar, a falsifier, a *creator* of truth - for when one loves one does not want to know reality straight, one wants to know, which here means create, the reality that one can love and be in love with. “Artists should see nothing as it is but fuller, simpler, stronger”, says Nietzsche. “To experience a thing as beautiful,” he continues, “means: to experience it necessarily wrongly.” But, in any case, “It is not possible to remain objective, or to suspend the interpretive, additive, interpolating, poetizing power.” Not, at least, if one is in love.

It is in this sense that we can approach and appreciate that famous saying of Nietzsche’s with which I headed this section of my current book. To repeat it: “We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.” There are at least two ways in which this can be understood. The first, and probably the way that I have understood it, at least until now, is that art is the opposite of truth. Here we might be tempted to think that truth is bad because false and art, as a positive, creative will to power, is the antidote. In other words, we don’t want to die of truths which aren’t true but in being creative we redeem ourselves from this deleterious attitude towards life. Yet there is another, perhaps better, way to

understand this saying. Immediately prior to this aphorism Nietzsche says, "For a philosopher to say, 'the good and the beautiful are one,' is infamy; if he goes on to add, 'also the true,' one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly." When Nietzsche says "Truth is ugly" he posits that there is indeed truth.

Yet he does so not in any epistemic or metaphysical sense but in an *aesthetic* sense. Indeed, it is truth as ugly that interests him for it is our response to ugliness, and need to make beautiful, that is at issue for Nietzsche. Truth is ugly for Nietzsche because truth as true, in its native trueness which is nothing to do with the moulding it receives in the hands of human potters moulding the clay that is its natural otherness, has nothing to do with us. "The truth", abstractly conceived, the truth that would be true even if none of us existed - which is what real truth would be - is ugly exactly because it has not been taken up by us and artistically moulded into something beautiful. The truth that is nothing to do with us, that was not created, that was not about our interpretations of things, would be whatever it just happened to be. It would not be confined by our aesthetics and subject to our tastes. But Nietzsche thinks that the truth we use, the truth we function with *is exactly that*. We have art lest we perish of the truth, then, because ugliness would kill us and our only way out of this is to make something beautiful. For this we will lie, falsify, fictionalise, interpret, create, fashion, manufacture, generate, dissimulate, idealise, imagine and dream. Artifice, and a necessarily self-deceptive artifice, is the practice of our will to truth and if the truth in focus is the meaning of a historical character called Jesus then this is where we focus our lover's art in lying, falsifying, fictionalising, interpreting, creating, fashioning, manufacturing, generating, dissimulating, idealising, imagining and dreaming about him. Here, in contrast to what Nietzsche calls "nature's magnificent indifference", we are far from indifferent.

Yet here our morality will intervene, a morality which insists that truth is just true and art, so conceived, must be immoral. Here we must innure ourselves, Cynic-like as Diogenes rolled in hot sands in summer and clung to freezing statues in winter to innure himself to extremes of both heat and cold, to our environment. This environment, says Nietzsche, is not a matter of "the antithesis of a real and apparent world" as if we were making up lies when the truth was a moral choice we could have made but instead ignored in our fallen state of immorality for which we must be held responsible. Instead, this:

"Is lacking here: there is only one world, and this is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning— A world thus constituted is the real world. We have need of lies in order to conquer this reality, this 'truth,' that is, in order to live— That lies are necessary in order to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence."

In short, we need new values and, having new values, a new morality. Those values and that morality will be artistic, they will be constitutive of a new artistic evaluating of life that is exactly a very moral lie: a lie in the cause of truth! An immoral morality! And so:

"Metaphysics, morality, religion, science... these things merit consideration only as various forms of lies: with their help one can have faith in life. 'Life ought to inspire confidence': the task thus imposed is tremendous. To solve it, man must be a liar by nature, he must be above all an artist. And he is one: metaphysics, religion, morality, science— all of them only products of his will to art, to lie, to flight from 'truth,' to negation of 'truth.' This ability itself, thanks to which he violates reality by means of lies, this artistic ability of man par

excellence— he has it in common with everything that is. He himself is after all a piece of reality, truth, nature: how should he not also be a piece of genius in lying!"

This will offend our taste but its logic, its biology, I contend, is irresistible. Human beings are liars, falsifiers, creators and this is the fundamental thing they are. They continually generate and manufacture themselves biologically, culturally, intellectually, and they cannot stop for to have stopped is to be dead, to have life no more. Life is this creation, it is this art, it is this desire to be in love with life and so to have something about life to love. And so once more:

"That the character of existence is to be misunderstood—profoundest and supreme secret motive behind all that is virtue, science, piety, artistry. Never to see many things, to see many things falsely, to imagine many things: oh how shrewd one still is in circumstances in which one is furthest from thinking oneself shrewd! Love, enthusiasm, 'God'— So many subtleties of ultimate self-deception, so many seductions to life, so much faith in life! In those moments in which man was deceived, in which he duped himself, in which he believes in life: oh how enraptured he feels! What delight! What a feeling of power! How much artists' triumph in the feeling of power!— Man has once again become master of 'material'—master of truth!— And whenever man rejoices, he is always the same in his rejoicing: he rejoices as an artist, he enjoys himself as power, he enjoys the lie as his form of power.—"

This is where I locate the truth of the gospels and the truth of the gospels of the historical Jesus with which we are so familiar today. Both are, in my view, a history of pious lies made with the best of intentions: the intention to glory in the power of a

writer's creation and so to find something in life worth living for. In both cases meaning and value have been central to such projects and the primacy of lying to oneself in a way thought moral is at the heart of such activity. To see things falsely, to generate beautiful fictions, is exactly the point of both gospels and the scholarship which in a post-Enlightenment age has fixated upon them. To make a "historical" Jesus has, thus, been a situated cultural project carried out according to the verities of its time and place but where such verities are generated, manufactured and fashioned by artists in love with the object of their desire in a way that makes meaningful - but only for them! It is then their apologetic job to try and make it meaningful for others too, to create and change the world, to mould its potter's clay into that which they think life is, their beloved, the object of their desire. Here, as "scientists of scripture" such scholars gleefully take to their task of being "masters of material" and so, they imagine, "masters of truth". They act, as did the evangelists before them, as supreme examples of those who practice misunderstanding the character of existence, as falsifiers and fictionalisers of reality for a pious purpose, for they are those, fundamentally, who believe that the end justifies the means. That which is intended for good, they imagine, cannot in itself be bad. And so we can imagine them rejoicing with Nietzsche, the artist-philosopher, who says:

"Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life."

Yet we can imagine them, behind their own backs, of course, for such art is first of all about deceiving oneself with its artistry, believing with Nietzsche yet more "immoral" things than this. For example:

"truth does not count as the supreme value, even less as the supreme power. The will to appearance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change (to objectified deception) here counts as more profound, primeval, 'metaphysical' than the will to truth, to reality, to mere appearance:— the last is itself merely a form of the will to illusion."

What may count rhetorically is that we pay obeisance at the altar of truth but life, in a hidden, or perhaps covered over, subterranean sense, is not actually a matter of this manufactured truth as fact. What matters underneath, deep down, biologically in our cells with their own will to creation which is far beyond the control of intellect, is to create, to be artists, and so those who do create as the practice of life to begin with. Life is not about truth; life is *creation* pure and simple! This, as Nietzsche might put it himself, is a biological imperative, a function of having life. Gospels, gospel scholarship, historical Jesus narrative, the historical Jesus, the "Christ of faith": these are all evidence for a lover's will to artifice, examples of that species which rarely sees that its highest and most divine calling is to create the world to which it can devote itself.

Nietzsche himself threw himself into this mentality even as others, too timid or too weak in the Nietzschean view to embrace it, would reject it. We must then, in this Nietzschean light, see evangelists and their scholarly apologists ever since as those too timid or too weak to embrace a greater truth against which they have not innured themselves: that there is something "more divine than truth: art." Indeed, "Art," says Nietzsche, "is worth more than truth" and "art is the real task of life". I believe evangelists and their scholarly, believing descendants do not know this, neither do they have the very theological, and theologically instituted, intuition for it. Perhaps they have deliberately closed their eyes to it. But some impulse within them, unidentified, non-intellectualised and

unrecognised, drives them on to create, falsify and piously manufacture Jesus in any case. In him they find life. He is their beloved. He must be made lovable. *He must be loved.*

17. Rafael Rodriguez, Bart Ehrman and *Jesus Before the Gospels*

Rafael Rodriguez is a Professor of New Testament who is a faculty member of Johnson University, a university which is a private, Christian university. I alighted upon him, reading various biblical papers and journals in the course of my research, because he turns out to be an alumnus of the (now scandalously defunct) Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield, UK, which is where I myself studied as both an undergraduate and a postgraduate. As alumni of the same department, then, - although Rodriguez began his postgraduate studies in Sheffield a year after I had already left the department - I feel something of a collegial familiarity with him although I have never met him. Rodriguez is also interesting to me because he was one of the first, in a wave of 21st century scholars, to study Jesus in the light of what is now called "memory studies" which is a form of study which studies memory as it relates to orality and the passing on of stories about historical events and asks what memory does to them, how reliable memory is, and associated questions. It is fair to say that a 21st century concentration on Jesus in the light of memory studies has led, somewhat, to a renaissance of seeing the material behind the gospels in more oral and less strictly literary terms as a focus on such study has, once more, made it more acceptable to imagine within the academy that orality, and oral and memory processes, were a defining feature of such material. In some this leads to dogmatic arguments for the gospels as all the product of "eyewitness testimony" but in others, among whom I count Rodriguez as one, it leads to more properly academic questions about the nature of the pre-gospel traditions which are helpful in setting the parameters of thought regarding the historical possibilities. In short, memory studies, as Rodriguez seems to carry it out, can help us to start asking the right questions. It cannot, as others have appropriated it, tell us "it happened like this". Or "like that."

In this chapter I am aiming to look particularly at a protracted, multi-part review Rodriguez undertook of Bart Ehrman's 2016 book *Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Early Christians Remembered, Changed and Invented Their Stories of The Savior*.³⁷⁴ According to Rodriguez, Ehrman is "perhaps one of the most famous NT scholars in America" and he calls his work "interesting" whilst mentioning his biography which, to be brief, details a person of faith who, through his scholarship, distances himself from that starting position. (In this, Ehrman is not unlike myself.) He has, thus, become a scholar who, in his prolific writing, has enunciated a liberal, academic position which undermines dogmas and faith positions habitually taken up and defended by the large body of Christian scholarship which in many places dominates biblical discussion.

For my own part, I must admit that I have often found Ehrman's arguments weak and populist and his popularity leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I imagine that there are others whose scholarship is more substantial than his own. Perhaps due to his biography, Ehrman has been a writer of popular, explanatory books which seek to popularise scholarly positions which are controversial only to those whose scholarship is a set of dogmas they are not, according to faith, allowed to doubt. Thus, whilst to such people Ehrman's writing may seem edgy, to others unburdened by such infelicities, it seems a bit weak and uncritical. It is, we may observe, very, very easy to poke holes in uneducated faith arguments and, in doing so, it may be the case that you don't study the subject itself with that much depth because you are too eager to debunk those of faith instead. In the book of Ehrman's that Rodriguez will critique here we see this lack of depth in evidence and its title, in a way instantly recognisable as American, sets out to scandalise those of faith. I imagine that does Ehrman's wallet no harm at the very least.

³⁷⁴ This review is found at https://www.academia.edu/26546916/Jesus_before_the_Gospels_A_Serial_Review

Jesus Before the Gospels is intended to be a book which engages with arguments about orality in the pre-gospel tradition and, indeed, with memory studies as it relates to that subject and so it falls well within the purview of Rodriguez's own interests and expertise to review such a book. Rodriguez describes himself as "part of the early wave of Jesus historians and scholars who have turned to questions of memory - and especially social/collective memory - in order to recalibrate the study of Jesus and Christian origins." Having read his review of the book, I noticed that as he goes through it, chapter by chapter, what is revealed is Rodriguez's own narrative of historical Jesus and gospel study in the sense of the historical and scholarly conditions of their production. Thus, it occurred to me that not only is Rodriguez interesting in terms of his academic arguments about the history but he is also interesting and instructive regarding the history of the scholarship that has produced the history. It should, by now, not have gone unnoticed that this double focus is a major component of my own writing on Jesus and the gospels. Thus, as I work my way through Rodriguez's review of Ehrman's book in this chapter it will be necessary both to take notice of Rodriguez's views on what Ehrman says and doesn't say but also to note what Rodriguez is saying in itself about both the historical Jesus and the gospels as well as the practice of academic study regarding them. Readers should, then, also keep this twofold focus in mind.

So a first item of note is near the beginning of Rodriguez's interaction with Ehrman's book in which Ehrman is linking his own work to that of the form critics of early 20th century biblical scholarship, the most famous of whom was Rudolf Bultmann. Here Ehrman seems to suggest that he is the first to present their work in the light of memory studies, a claim Rodriguez finds quite surprising, not least because one imagines that he is much more aware of biblical scholars doing work in the area of memory studies than

Ehrman gives evidence for in regard to himself. Ehrman, indeed, seems to link memory studies with the work of the form critics which it is only tangentially so in that both have a declared interest in rationalising the oral tradition and oral processes which result in the gospels. Here, however, Rodriguez seems to highlight that Ehrman appears to be asking something of an apologetic question of memory studies in his use of it. He seems to be asking of memory studies how well the gospels remember Jesus - perhaps in order to give a more negative assessment than others in the biblical academy, such as British scholar Richard Bauckham with his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, have done.

Here, and more specifically, Ehrman seems to want to position his interest in memory studies as a matter of what it can say about "eyewitness testimony" and, thus, the gospels' historical reliability, and this suggests some polemical intent on Ehrman's part which is understandable in the light of his aforementioned biography. Rodriguez is, then, right to highlight that Ehrman points up his scepticism of the gospels' reliability in various comments throughout his book indicating that this is to be a book in which he attempts, from the point of view of memory studies, to flesh out said scepticism. It is, of course, then a moot point as to if, or how well, memory studies can actually bear the burden of such a polemical project. Can memory studies be used to demonstrate historical unreliability in particular cases? Will Ehrman's grasp of the insights of memory studies, or even of the operation of memory, be adequate to the task of adjudicating this?

At least in regard to his opening chapter, Rodriguez is sceptical of this. Ehrman's concept of memory, he argues, is "a simplistic conception of memory" which thinks of memory as "like a chain" when, according to Rodriguez, it is much more social and "like a culture".

"Ehrman," complains Rodriguez, "writes as if memory moves from individual to individual in a unidirectional manner" which, we may muse, seems to be Ehrman using the language of memory and orality but still with the image of textuality and copying in his head. (Here we may note that at the beginning of his career Ehrman was famously very much interested in textual criticism, that branch of biblical study which seeks to sift through our documentary evidence for the text of the Bible and argue for that which was most original. Ehrman, in his history, is very much implicated in textual models of biblical study.) And so Rodriguez, right off the bat, accuses Ehrman of misunderstanding memory. It is for him not a matter of a chain of memory links but of a "web". This, he continues, is not a "web of facts" but "webs of significance", a phrase he gets from Clifford Geertz, in which "groups and individuals find and make... meaning." So Rodriguez's contention is that we get memory wrong if we think of it as a chain we must not break, lest we lose the reliability, rather than as a web of significances, something which is much more robust and which would operate in an entirely different way in any case. We must not confuse oral models of transmission in which memory is implicated with literary ones more to do with copying text on a page and scribal processes.

The second part of Rodriguez's "serial review", which deals with Ehrman's first chapter, "Oral Traditions and Oral Inventions", stumbles upon an important aspect of memory studies from my point of view. In the chapter Ehrman himself is concerned to show that people can remember wrong and people can remember right, both in general and in regard to Jesus. But configuring the discussion in this way seems problematic from the start to one so hermeneutically concerned as, I hope, I have shown myself to be in my previous work. Can we ever say that a memory of an event is "right" or "wrong"? What factors there will contextualise or justify such designations? And to who? If two people

remember an event differently, which is to say interpretively, is one simply right or simply wrong as if there were some inherent or essential description of the events remembered which acts as judge and jury to all other remembrances? Ehrman, in the first chapter of his book, lists lots of memories he clearly thinks “wrong” - but why aren’t they just different, or different interpretations, which is to say uses, of Jesus instead?

So why, in other words, can something spoken of Jesus not be a kind of remembrance of him without necessarily being the forensically and essentially accurate recitation of events that some, perhaps Ehrman and Rodriguez included, seem to want the act of memory to be because they only judge memory on a static and binary “right/wrong” scale? Is memory simply not a much more hermeneutically involved matter than that? Indeed, is there even such a thing as a standard memory against which to measure all the other memories? Is memory even a matter of measurement and accuracy? What, most basically, does “right” and “wrong” or “accurate” and “inaccurate” mean here? Do events speak for themselves? It would seem incumbent upon those who attenuate the debate in terms of anxiety about accuracy to describe - in detail - how such a conception even works for it seems, at least to this interpreter, simply not to. And so, when Ehrman talks about “distorted” memories what does that actually mean and has Ehrman, or anyone using such vocabulary, actually got the philosophical tools and sophistication necessary to articulate a discourse about memory that is adequate to human experience of it?

In the second chapter of Ehrman’s book, “The History of Invention”, which is largely about the synoptic gospels, Ehrman makes clear that by “distorted” memories he means “memories of things that did not really happen” and here Ehrman, now certainly set on a course which is about the authenticity, which is to say accuracy, of the memories

contained, wants to know what practically was in place between the events of Jesus' life and the writing of these gospels to ensure such accuracy or what was missing which would entail inaccuracy or, in his unhelpful terms, "distortion". Rodriguez himself picks up on this and highlights Ehrman's seeming tendency to "exhibit the obsession, traditional among historians of Jesus, with an Archimedean point from which to survey and assess the 'accuracy' of the early Christians' texts." He continues:

"Jesus, in this perspective, said or did X, and the texts either do or they don't accurately record X. We, however, no longer have access to this Archimedean point (as if we ever did), and so this kind of analysis which Ehrman offers is, in fact, impossible."

In my view, Rodriguez gets this absolutely correct. Ehrman is actually attempting the impossible in using a standard of measurement by which to judge memory. That he would do so under the cover of memory studies, which in its breadth of interest is far from so static and singular in its conception of remembrance and memories, as Rodriguez shows in his own nuanced introduction of various relevant scholars and their work in his discussion of Ehrman's book, would seem, at best, misleading on Ehrman's part. However we are going to judge memory, then, or utilise memory studies, it should not be in a way which sees authenticity regarded as mere accuracy as the important thing - or even as a task we can carry out with integrity. Much better, it seems to me, is Rodriguez's chosen approach which does not see the gospels as documents about which we are only interested in order to impute accuracy or inaccuracy - which is coterminous with their usefulness or uselessness accordingly. Rodriguez himself talks of gospels as "vehicles of meaning that carry forward the legacy of the past in order to frame the present" and this is both much more helpful language and a much more helpful attitude

towards such documents and the oral traditions behind them. Put more simply, the issue here is not merely “Are the gospels accurate?” judged by some impossible to justify measuring scheme but, instead, “How do the gospels carry the past they remember into their present and for what purpose?” This is to ask what the gospels make of Jesus inasmuch as this is wrapped up in issues of memory and orality at all. As both Rodriguez and Ehrman agree, memory is always memory from the standpoint of now, from our present moment, and is, thus, a matter of relativity and relatability. This, you will be not at all surprised to hear me say, is once more an interpretive, rhetorical and fictional business. It cannot be simplified into some impossible “accurate or inaccurate” scheme.

Meanwhile, in that same chapter Ehrman takes yet more heat from Rodriguez for his attention to the form critics whose work Rodriguez now thinks openly out of date. This is important for there was, and perhaps even currently still is, a branch of historical Jesus and gospel scholarship which relies on its concepts of independent pericopes floating around, of layers of tradition which can be examined to reveal earlier forms of it, etc. The British scholar, Tom Wright, has, for example, accused the Jesus Seminar of the 1990s and the major scholars associated with it, pre-eminently John Dominic Crossan, whom I have myself interacted with extensively in my own studies, of being modern descendants of the form critics and of utilising their conclusions and assumptions in error. Here Rodriguez argues that “Anthropologists” and “Folklorists” “do not conceive of traditions in terms of ‘layers’ that can be peeled back to expose earlier forms” and he notes that John Miles Foley, who in his work has expounded on the insights of Albert Lord’s *Singer of Tales*, a now classic study of oral tradition and the dynamic of composing long, oral poetry, “certainly does not conceive of pre-written oral traditions in terms of individual stories... stripped from their narrative contexts.”

Indeed, Rodriguez pronounces the work of the form critics out of date even when Lord published his book in 1960 and he points to a book by E.P. Sanders at the end of the 1960s, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*, which, even then, Rodriguez thinks was sounding the death knell for the idea of “orderly, measurable trajectories” of tradition even though we may note, in contradiction of this point, the influential 1971 book by Robinson and Koester (the latter an actual student of the pre-eminent form critic Bultmann) *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* to balance this up. In short, we can say that in the last century of gospel study there has been at least two ways to practice it and apply that practice to history. One of these worked in terms of trajectories and the other did not. Here Crossan and his methods stand as a descendant of the form critics and their working assumptions and Dale Allison, most notably in his 2010 book, *Constructing Jesus*, stands in that tradition which eschews form critical practice to, instead, regard the general character of tendencies of the synoptic tradition for an overall view of the gist of the material instead. Eagle-eyed readers of my own work will note, perhaps with a rue smile, that in my own books I have tended to side more with Crossan than Allison in this parting of the ways although I would like to think of myself as *between* these two traditions rather than siding with one or the other. In terms of this particular discussion, Rodriguez would be with Allison and Ehrman would be with Crossan.

Methods aside, however, there are still some quite large and overarching questions to ask here about memory, ones not necessarily primarily affected by your methods in making use of the gospels. Most of all here I am thinking of narrative’s adequacy to the job of describing history. Or, rather, inadequacy. As Ehrman so far appears to be using memory studies, both in Rodriguez’s serial review of his book and in that book itself, it is

a matter of the gospel material's accuracy, of its rightness or wrongness. The reader would be there right to imagine that Ehrman thinks this should make a difference in our appraisal of both Jesus and Christianity in the light of this as well. But if you have read my own previous work, some of which focused on interpretation and hermeneutics, or even if you haven't, it should seem obvious that even if we could ascribe to the gospels 100% accuracy and authenticity in every remembrance of Jesus (and, remember, this is something we haven't done because it is, and will always remain, impossible to do - besides, in my view, being an epic misunderstanding to want to do it in the first place) the finished product - in each case - would still not be anything remotely resembling an inherent or essential or necessary interpretation of Jesus. It wouldn't, for example, be Jesus' own interpretation of himself, something which, we must imagine, would surely make a difference to those who show so much interest in him that they want to say he is or was this or that. So there are all sorts of questions in play, ones, frankly, that are to do with hermeneutics, and these cannot be set aside because we think the only question that matters is if the memories recorded in gospels are true or false.

This is just one reason why my whole approach has been a matter of *fiction* for fiction can tell the truth - yet without the burden of having to tell the truth. That may sound like a riddle - and in some senses it is. But it is also to say that the issue of memory in gospel study is a matter of interpretation and not an issue of fact. Every story could be true and the whole be false and every story could be false and the whole be true - for memories don't determine how they are connected together in more meaningful wholes or, even if they do, they have no power to say what those fuller interpretational schemes shall amount to. That's what hermeneutics means for the gospels. It means that describing Jesus truly is not simply a matter of some impossible to prosecute program of

demonstrating a memory's reality or authenticity to some inherent historical truth that doesn't, and never did, exist. In each case, instead, it is a matter of interpretations which *generate* facts and connections between those facts, that mould the raw clay of historical reality and actuality into that we call an understanding of it. Memories are constructed from a present and from a *present interpretationally understood and constructed*. To imagine, as Ehrman seems to, that we stand to the side while memories adjudicate their accuracy or inaccuracy, speaking for themselves as they do, is simply a gross misunderstanding of both memory and of human beings as beings who only ever understand by means of interpretation, interpretation that, after Nietzsche, I have termed fictionalising whole and entire. It is in this sense that, even if the gospels contained events that 100% did happen, the whole could still be false. For what matters is never what happened *in the abstract* but only what happened *in its meaning and significance*. And that is not something events can ever themselves supply even if they can be the cause of it.

All this is helpful when we come to the next part of Rodriguez's review of Ehrman's book in which Ehrman wants to ask if the gospels are the result of eyewitnesses writing their text or Christian storytellers playing pass the story parcel until the stories ended up in books instead. As a follow up to that question, Ehrman also wants to ask if eyewitnesses writing the gospels would guarantee their essential accuracy to boot. Here we should agree with Ehrman's conclusion that, of course, we should not conclude that an eyewitness actually writing the text of a gospel (which few would maintain is the case anyway) would make it infallibly accurate. This is not least because, in the light of my recent, hermeneutically charged comments, the very notion of an "inherently true" recitation of the life and times of Jesus is a naive notion that we should dismiss. An

eyewitness could write an eyewitness's account of what happened and what it meant for them. But that wouldn't force any reader to come to the same conclusions or even to agree that the eyewitness "got it right". For here what even counts as "getting it right" is a matter of historical interpretation and so the mere fact of an eyewitness author doesn't settle a single historical question in actual fact. Rather, it makes the doing of historical interpretation all the more necessary in order to verify and understand what such an eyewitness has said and how and why s/he has understood in that way. What's more, all this, by the by, is besides the analysis of memory Ehrman gives in this part of his book - and with which Rodriguez seems to agree - in terms of our ability to create false memory, to invent incidents which never occurred, to add in details to events that are not true to what happened, etc., which are all the results of credible memory research. To repeat: an eyewitness testimony doesn't guarantee history. Rather, it necessitates the even greater study of history and its interpretation as such.

At this point in his review Rodriguez raises an interesting point when he questions memory studies itself in its conclusions about memory, particularly in highlighting memory's failings and unreliability, something which, clearly, has some stakes if one regards the outcome of memory's reliability or relative unreliability as a matter of consequence. The suggestion here, one he takes up on behalf of memory researcher, Barry Schwartz, is that such research sometimes seems contrived to heighten the unreliability of memory when, in the habitual practice of people we call sane, we observe that it is entirely normal to trust our memories even if we realise that, on occasion, they can be mistaken. However, when it comes to the general thrust of memory, we all of us imagine that we have a faculty that can remember the past reliably enough to describe what it does as "getting things right". Here, of course, it is crucial what "getting things

right” means for us for if it means something akin to “my interpretation of a past fact or event that I call remembering it in this moment” then that is not to say that this functions as something which lines up with the inherent truth of past events. Memory here, I am saying once more, has the character of an interpretation rather than the recollection of an abstract fact. For there are no abstract facts. Thus, whilst memory can be accurate or not - we have practices which we call remembering things accurately or inaccurately - it is always interpretation. In dealing with memories we have to deal with their interpretational nature as well as their accuracy and these two can often be intertwined as in when, as Rodriguez says, “our memories of events that actually *did* happen differ [from] our experiences of those events at the time.” This is to say that even where we correctly remember an event happening what it means can change over time. Correct remembrance of events, then, does not entail a “correct” interpretation of the events. But what would a “correct” interpretation be anyway? And how would its “correctness” be decided? Interpretations are things into which events and memories both fit rather than being things which memories and events adjudicate. Any “correctness” involved is then only as the result of an interpretive practice rather than being conceived of as a realist rightness.

This is important to note when Ehrman chides Richard Bauckham, author of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, a book which seeks to found the gospels on the basis of - so he imagines - reliable eyewitness testimony, and others for believing the testimony of the likes of Papias, second century bishop of Hierapolis in his testimony regarding the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Ehrman charges, essentially, that those who believe this kind of testimony do so because they want to, because it suits the narrative they want to tell. Rodriguez, in his turn critiquing this view, essentially says “Back atcha!” to Ehrman

and demonstrates that Ehrman, too, believes things, for example in Mark's gospel, when he wants to and when it suits his narrative but not when he doesn't. In both cases, then, people believe things from writers even when those self-same sources say things they clearly don't believe too. My own view on this would be to ask if it is really such a big deal in either case? The simple fact is that anybody and everybody believes things *as they make sense to them*. This may indeed include believing some things and not others and even from the same source. Is this not what we call interpretation in action where interpretation is to construct a perspectival take on events that is both social - in that it interacts with the world - but also personal - in that its product will be in some sense uniquely ours? The issue here, it seems to me, is ultimately a rhetorical one and specifically one of making arguments that will seem justified to their hearers rather than of any procedure which is beyond the bounds of credibility. People, it seems to me, do indeed believe things "because they want to" and it is not necessarily the case that they should be chided for this impulse alone for it is having a dog in the fight of the meaning of things that generates meaning in the first place. It is because we have an interpretational take to bring to bear in the matter of facts and events, and because we have a requirement to make sense *to us*, that such issues are even important to begin with. So it seems to me that although it may sometimes be pertinent to bring up a researcher's investments no one should ever be surprised that there are such investments. It is these investments which have created the need to understand at all. They, indeed, are *generative* of our subsequent understanding.

This is brought out by Rodriguez in the next section of his review where he discusses Ehrman's chapter on "Distorted Memories and the Death of Jesus." Rodriguez begins here by reminding us that, in Ehrman's usage, "distorted memories" means "memories of

things that did not happen” and so, formally, “distorted memories” are in a sense not really memories at all. Instead, they are inventions categorised as memories. Ehrman is one who sees a goodly amount of invention in the gospels and, since he is in this book attempting to use the language of memory studies to justify this, “distorted memories” is his, in my view, clumsy way of describing this phenomenon. Yet, in interpretational context, “distorted” as the opposite of true is a highly problematic and muddled usage - as Rodriguez himself points out. It is these “distortions” which are themselves the generators of any truth the gospels want to tell. The “distortions” aren’t hampering or covering over or hiding the truth: they are the means to it. This is because these “distortions” are simply nothing other than interpretations and even where they are not interpretations of things that actually happened. They are interpretations at a much deeper and more fundamental level than the surface level of “true or false” that Ehrman wants to concern himself with.

Here the character of the gospels is implicated in a fundamental way as well as the question of how we are going to characterise them. Are we to judge them by journalistic standards of “right or wrong” in terms of accurate reporting? Or, instead, are we going to see them as documents which want to interpret Jesus and his meaning at the most fundamental level yet without being bound to the static “true or false” paradigm which, increasingly, seems to be the only way that Ehrman can conceptualize them? It is, I think, a matter of this either or even if we take the view that the gospels can include accounts of incidents that did occur or if we hold out the hope that they will be generally made up of such material. It would be my contention that they don’t *need* to be characterised in this way to still be regarded as *true* yet neither does that assessment require that everything in them be accounts of things that never happened either. Here, I can happily

agree with Dale Allison in *Constructing Jesus* that in the overwhelming majority of cases we are highly unlikely to ever know one way or the other anyway. So, in this sense, such a question of case by case historical veracity in journalistic terms is a bit of a red herring. Why fixate on a question you can never answer? But Rodriguez, in his analysis of Ehrman on this point, gives a further insight in any case.

Bart Ehrman discusses at this juncture in his book the research of Ulrich Neisser regarding the testimony and memory of John Dean in relation to the Watergate cover-up and he frames this discussion in terms of accurate, word for word, remembrance of, and in, said testimony. Ehrman poses a challenge to readers to remember, word for word, any conversation they had with someone two years ago. Of course, we would all admit we couldn't do it and Ehrman sees this as some kind of win for his point of view that "distorted" memories means getting things wrong. Ehrman presents Neisser's research as showing that Dean could barely remember a word Nixon said, or that he himself said, from a couple of years previously and so he concludes that memory is no route to accurate remembrance and so truth, impugning the gospels his book is about in the process as part of such a conclusion, as well as the use of Neisser's research within it.

The problem here is, as Rodriguez shows, that this was not Neisser's own conclusion - and neither is it that of Rodriguez. What that research showed was that Dean was saying things that were true of the Nixon White House that went far beyond the level of an accurate, word for word, retrieval of past conversations or even the gist of those self-same conversations. Neisser thought that even though Dean's remembrances of conversations were not what was actually said they still described the person they were about. This is to say that Dean got things right even where he got the conversations

wrong. It is this kind of conclusion that Ehrman seems singly unable to process, not having the conceptual apparatus at his disposal to be able to understand. For Ehrman, with his “distortions”, getting the detail wrong is to get the whole thing wrong and to have “invented”, something we can only see as impugning the accounts. But things are not this simple where interpretation and construction abound and can we say, in such a situation, that merely getting the right words in the right order is the thing of paramount importance? Is it only this which is the correct and valid operation of memory? Is this even what memory is primarily about? If it can be the case, as Neisser asserts and as Rodriguez agrees, that things can be got right even where the detailed remembrance is wrong, then it would seem that it is Ehrman’s approach which is at fault in what seems to be a more textual, or text critical, approach to memory than something more properly appropriate to memory itself. Memories, indeed, are not to be reconstructed *as if they were texts* and correct reconstruction is not to be regarded as putting all the words back together again as they were “originally”. So, as Rodriguez says, the issue is not now if one can recall the word for word detail of a conversation from two years ago but, instead, if one can recall “the broader realities” of the occasion of such a conversation. What’s more, this might be a conversation you have had multiple occasions to recall in varying circumstances rather than something which, two years later, you are out of the blue asked to recall. This, I’m sure you will see, is now a very different situation from the one Bart Ehrman first set up.

In this distinction we once more set at odds those who think truthful history in the gospels is a matter of word for word reconstruction of textually articulated memory and the “broader truths” that memory can, regardless of the accuracy of the detail, supply. Ehrman is operating within the first paradigm here even as Rodriguez is in the second.

This raises the prospect, if Rodriguez and not Ehrman be on the right track, that gospels can be “essentially correct” even if they are not faithful to any particular occasion in their retellings of individual events. This, in turn, is to suggest that faithful interpretations are simply not to be equated with accurate retellings in a way Ehrman seems to want to insist they are. So, to counter Ehrman, we can indeed tell the truth without telling the truth, we can, in Ehrman’s terms, “distort” the truth - but only in order to tell the truth - for it is the distortion which is the vehicle of the truth! This is neither a matter of “gist” or detail of specific conversations or events but, rather, the “common characteristics of a whole series of events” as Rodriguez quotes Neisser. This, I believe, is to say that we interpret the truth rather than to say, as Ehrman does, that the truth interprets itself and it is our job to constantly remove the dust sheet of history from it to reveal it once more or to pull back that self-same sheet to reveal falsehood instead. I am saying, as I think Rodriguez might be too, that such truth is constructed: it is not self-arbitrating. Interpretations, including interpretations made of memory, do not obscure Jesus: they constitute him. Rodriguez here concludes that Ehrman’s paradigm is actually quite a poor tool to do what he wants to do with it in any case. Since Ehrman assumes “distortion” means “false” or “did not happen” he cannot then use a discussion of memory to ask what is going on in what is actually written down, something which may be very much to do with memory - in Rodriguez’s understanding of that - in its being there. Thus, we see the full extent of Ehrman’s “true/false” fixation and how bereft of depth and sophistication it really is. Put simply, it is not an adequate engagement either with memory and memory studies or even with the history contained within the gospels whether it is accurate reporting or not.

And so it goes on when Ehrman wants to discuss “Distorted Memories and the Life of Jesus.” The pattern is now set, of course, and Ehrman is out on a hunt for “falsehood” or “invention” in a very textual, but not so much oral, conception of the issues at hand. Recall here, if you will, that Ehrman’s book is called *Jesus Before the Gospels* and so he is, quite formally, supposed to be dealing primarily with oral material. If he does this in what seem to be textual ways we, as critics of his work, are right to call this out and ask how appropriate textual thinking and procedures are to the subject of oral materials. In Rodriguez’s critique of the work Ehrman does in his book he paints a picture of a scholar somewhat at odds with the techniques and conclusions of those he aims to interact with from the field of memory studies, sometimes misrepresenting its conclusions - as we just saw in his misuse of Neisser - and sometimes simply too stuck within his out of date practices as a biblical scholar.

For example, in his review of this particular section of Ehrman’s book, Rodriguez accuses Ehrman of using the term “distorted” in a way completely at odds with its use in the field of memory studies, something I have already criticised above for my own reasons, and of being attached to now discredited criteriological approaches to the practice of historical study in the biblical academy which aim to recover a now lost past. Dale Allison, too, as one shining example, has criticised the use of criteria to “recover” a historical Jesus as a game which is wrong-headed and, not insignificantly, next to useless in its results and Rodriguez also mentions the book *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, edited by Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, which takes a broadly similar view. Fundamentally, Rodriguez questions, then, how much memory studies specifically has affected the historical views Ehrman has about Jesus and the gospels or even if it has much at all. Is it the case that here a scholar schooled in an outdated form criticism, experienced in the

practice of textual criticism, is using the language of memory and orality but still thinking in terms of literature, something which would be a grave error indeed?

This conclusion seems to find evidence when Rodriguez discusses Ehrman's use of work done by Jan Vansina. Here Ehrman quotes Vansina as saying "Every time a tradition is recited the testimony may be a variant version" and he takes this to mean "when testimonies are cited frequently... they change more often than when recited only on occasion." The clear implication there is that the more something is recited or retold the more likely it is, in Ehrman's terms, to be "distorted" and so end up being something that never happened. Here Rodriguez deploys the right angle of attack when he notes, quite accurately, that Ehrman's entire concern throughout his book is with a very form or text critical concentration on the *ipsissima verba* - whether of Jesus or gospels and their pre-existing traditions - and this *generates* the shape of the problem as he conceives of it. The point is, though, that this is a very specific conception of the problem and *it is not necessarily the shape of the problem from the point of view of memory studies*. One can see how it would fit the concerns of a form and textual critic very well though. Instead, Rodriguez indicts Ehrman for not having "dealt seriously with the communal recurrence of the Jesus tradition in the years between Jesus and the gospels." In short, Ehrman never really, in a way memory studies and especially social or communal memory studies certainly would, gets to the nub of why the Jesus tradition even is the Jesus tradition. Instead he fixates on the distance of documents from putative events and obsesses about all the possibilities and opportunities for "distortion". In doing so, Ehrman reveals himself as in hock to former ways of doing things barely educated by the ways of a more contemporary memory studies. He is still conceiving his task as that of sifting out the

inauthentic from the authentic both as if he could do this and as if it were the point. But he can't and it isn't.

Here Rodriguez diagnoses Ehrman's fatal flaw as conceiving that "a tradition's variability and malleability through time [i]s a movement away from an accurate original" which is pretty much textual criticism turned around to pursue it in the opposite direction, i.e., from the source into increasing variants rather than from the variants textual critics work back from to reconstruct the source. Thus, with such a conception as Rodriguez charges Ehrman with having, the latter can only imagine that each performance of oral memory is but a step further away from the source and so on. Rodriguez rightly charges here that Ehrman has, in so doing, lost all touch with any notion of tradition in such a procedure and with any sense that "telling stories about Jesus", as an activity, might engender deep truths about Jesus within such communities as did this that are not strictly or even a matter of word for word accuracy in recall of events involving, or words spoken by, Jesus at all. The textual model, we may say, is simply not adequate or appropriate to oral material. In such oral material the connections between the retellings and the identity of the material as, in some sense, true are *never* a matter of word for word accuracy and this is simply not how their truth should be judged. It is a textual conception entirely out of place when working with orally transmitted remembrances.

A single sentence Rodriguez quotes from Albert Lord's *Singer of Tales* serves to sum this up: "The singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator." This is to say that this singer is both bound by the traditional connections that have been made in previous retellings of the tale but also free to modify, or even innovate, within these

boundaries so that it results in a recognisably familiar tale being told yet not always in the same way. In short, the singer tells the traditional tale but in their own way in a communal-personal hybrid of the tale that is a community possession or, rather, by which the community are possessed. We should here recall that the task of these tales in the first instance is to promote social cohesion around a set of shared beliefs and so it would seem totally contrary to purpose if such oral retellings resulted in wild invention completely at odds with what binds the tradition together as a tradition in the first place. Here, then, we should be aware of "tradition" as a framework that any retelling is not simply free to ignore. Any tale told must recognisably relate to it and make sense in the light of it. This is, then, the check and balance on any stories told about Jesus rather than some original it would be impossible to find because it never existed in any case. Further, this understanding is one more appropriate to an oral context rather than the literary ones Ehrman seems to be guided by.

To make this social point further it is worth actually quoting some of Rodriguez's review directly in order to hammer this home. He writes in the seventh part of his serial review that:

"The power of collective memory - or what Maurice Halbwachs called 'the social frameworks of memory'... - is largely invisible, as is the social construction of knowledge in general. We largely take the world in which we live for granted. That is, until we encounter another world, and we run smack into the existence of other ways of perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the real world."

This is important because:

"Our social context performs a constitutive [role] in determining how we remember the past (and even which past we remember!), and changes in that context do indeed often result in changes in the past one encounters in the present."

Thus, for Rodriguez, the issue for memory studies and their impact upon traditions about Jesus is not that memory or orality changes things, nor even merely that in remembering we constitute that which is remembered. Both of these things, however, would be stumbling blocks for Ehrman who describes the overall product of such eventualities as "a kaleidoscopically varied set of images" - a phrase which Rodriguez claims he can work with even while also noting to the side that Ehrman seems intent on "overemphasiz[ing] the differences."

Yet for Rodriguez the real meat of all this, and something which he, once more, charges Ehrman with misunderstanding, is that, following Maurice Halbwachs:

"'social' or 'collective' memory... refers to a dynamic of memory as such and not to a particular kind of memory... Memory - not episodic memory or procedural memory or eyewitness memory or cultural memory; just memory, full stop - is a social phenomenon, and it is constituted, conveyed and transformed via social processes."

Thus understood, much of Ehrman's anxiety about change and inaccuracy in oral retellings based on memory is mitigated, it seems to me. It is his inappropriate use of literary frames of reference which induces that anxiety and regards it as a problem. His distinction between inaccurate, "distorted" memories and accurate or "gist" memories, as he calls them, is based in an elementary mistake. Rodriguez, however, has much the

better of this when he notes, correctly, that “Memory itself is subject to processes of selection, interpretation, communication, contestation and evaluation. All of these are distorting forces... but these are also the forces that preserve and transmit memory across generations.”

The difference between Rodriguez and Ehrman here, whatever their own views on the matter, seems to me to be that, whether acknowledged or not, Ehrman seems to conceive there is a pristine (i.e. “undistorted”) event there to find behind the memory, should such a memory actually refer to a genuine event, whereas Rodriguez does not. Rodriguez acknowledges and follows through on the notion that it is “distortion” which is the vehicle of memory and Ehrman does not. Indeed, Rodriguez, citing Anthony Le Donne’s use of the term “refraction” instead of “distortion”, makes the helpful point that such optical effects can sometimes obscure but they can also sharpen the focus and even provide a new clarity. So such effects are not about “bemoaning the loss of some pristine truth” but they are about “all knowledge of the past... [being] only an approximation of the past.” Ehrman, in contrast to this view, seems very much more all or nothing about it. As a retort to this simplistic view, Rodriguez replies that “We cannot easily read texts and lift the circumstances of their present from their constructions of the past.” What is more, “we are constituted by the past we remember” (emphasis mine). We never do escape that pesky fact of life called interpretation!

We are now into the home stretch as we reach Rodriguez’s final part of his serial review of Bart Ehrman’s *Jesus Before the Gospels*. Rodriguez begins this by noting Ehrman’s self-admitted and quite narrow fixation on “what did or didn’t happen” as the focus of his work as a historian of biblical tradition. Rodriguez agrees with Ehrman that “Knowing

that this or that event happened in history *is* important” but here I wonder if both scholars, inveigled with Christianity as they both are, are not here subject to the boundaries of their own traditions. Some strands of Christianity in the modern day seem almost entirely defined by not just the events they claim to recall but also the narratives they are embedded in. These are regarded as being literally, historically true and such people make this the hill to die on. But it is similarly not impossible to imagine Christianities more mystical, and so less historical, which claim a direct experience of God and so, consequently, do not need to die on the hill of the historicity of specific events and the narratives that claim to inherently depict them and supply their essential meaning. And if you thought you experienced God directly why would you need to bolster increasingly rhetorical historical arguments to claim your faith is historically validated as true anyway?

Therefore, the historicity of specific events and the historicity of specific narratives - even their infallibility - is an aspect of some, but not all, Christianities even as the understanding of what history is or what historicity means is also a matter of some debate in the appropriate places. These, as Rodriguez notes, all come to be matters of identity since those interested in such things invest themselves in their beliefs about them. But this is only to say that in taking part in such debates those involved feel that something is at stake. That, indeed, is why they are taking part in such debates. But none of this means that the historicity they seek through the practice of such research is there to find. I am once more reminded of the bold and somewhat unusual stand Dale Allison took in *Constructing Jesus* when he quite openly doubted if much of the history, not least in its detail and circumstance, *was* actually there to find in the first place. And pronounced himself unperturbed if it was to be the case that it wasn't. Yet the historian

of Jesus and the gospels, and particularly the one who feels the need to focus on the “did this or did this not happen?” question, always needs to reckon with the very real prospect that such a question is unanswerable. (Scholars on every imaginable side of the debate equally and singularly fail to do this.) Such people, as many in apologetic places do, also need to reckon with the fact that hoisting a standard above their head labelled “memory” is not some totem which will scare away doubts about the history of Jesus and the creation of the gospels whole and entire. Memory is not a cure-all which enables us to once more see the gospels as historically true where former methods of study led us into sober and methodical doubt. The greater truth, as Allison will always remind us, is that “we don’t know” will perhaps always be the most common answer to such historical questions. Historians of Jesus must, therefore, be prepared to be scrupulously, bitingly honest in admitting what they don’t, and even cannot, know.

Here Rodriguez and Ehrman, to save them from finally being lumped in with the historical infallibilists they are not a part of, both contend that “there is more to Christianity than history” and that the gospels are “so much more than historical sources” and in these judgments I heartily agree with them. But here what counts will always come down to this: if “everyone acknowledges”, as Rodriguez contends, that there never was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho in the story Jesus tells in Luke’s gospel that we now know as the story of the Good Samaritan, and so that this story is fictional, then does it matter, or why would it matter, if the story of Jesus telling that story *was also fictional*? This is to say that it is all fine and dandy to make magnanimous announcements about this or that being “so much more than history” but, if that is to be the case, then how are those making such claims going to follow through on such stated beliefs? Or, indeed, are they going to follow through on them at all? So,

Rodriguez may claim that the Good Samaritan has “truthicity” which “has nothing to do with its historical referentiality” in the closing section of his review but what then about the written gospels, oral traditions and “remembrances” that lead to it being in a gospel accredited to Luke in the first place? Is this recognition of “more than historical truth” something which can only ascribe fiction to some parabolical contents of the gospels or can it also ascribe it to the major apparent purposes and characters of the selfsame gospels - or even to gospels whole and entire - and yet still claim that such “truthicity” is both valid and meaningful? Some, such as John Dominic Crossan, seem able to almost do this. Others, not so much.

Rodriguez goes on to argue that this is a matter of genre and, certainly in the history of gospel scholarship, many have focused on the genre of the gospels as a means to determining, once and for all, if the gospels really mean what they say as definitive historical report. In his brief discussion of this, Rodriguez gives two poles for that discussion, the ‘history book’ which is meant to give accurate descriptions of the proximate causes of events, and which will be judged false if these are incorrect, and the ‘literature’ which can speak of truths without anyone being expected to believe that the events present in the narrative actually took place. For myself, and if these be the poles, I see the gospels as somewhere between these two. I am reluctantly but finally sympathetic to those who argue that the communities from which these gospels came did believe that they were reciting events which occurred (which, even then, is not to say that they *did* occur) whilst also being very aware that the gospels, as narratives, simply cannot be true because no narrative can claim to have completely, totally and absolutely, much less inherently and essentially, explained and understood reality. In short, if someone provides a narrative of events, any narrative of any events, it is at least a

fiction. And its truth must be judged along the lines of such fictional truth exactly as it would be in a work of literature as Rodriguez defines it.

So, the gospels may have elements of historicity. But they certainly have their truthicity. In this, memory and memory studies have played an increasing part in the 21st century practice of historical Jesus and gospel studies yet they are still only tools in the hands of those with their own beliefs, truths and desires, whether Ehrman's or Rodriguez's, or yours or mine. We should contextualise them and their usage accordingly and be prepared to use them appropriately to present the meaningful fictions of the past that are, in the end, the things that matter to us as things that matter to us which, in my view, is what all such scholarship ultimately is. Memory and memory studies is not a panacea for any position on the historical Jesus and the gospels. It is just one more tool in the hands of those who tell stories full of meaning that seek to contextualise the world we all live in in one way or another.

18. Jesus in the 21st Century: Memory Studies

Having been introduced to memory studies in the context of the historical Jesus and the gospels by Rafael Rodriguez in his review of Bart Ehrman's book, we must now turn to the subject more specifically in the wider context of notable others who have started to make contributions to this noticeably 21st century endeavour. It is true that in the 20th century biblical scholars more widely, and New Testament and gospel specialists more particularly, had taken an interest in oral tradition as the building blocks of especially the New Testament gospels. Guided largely by the form critics Bultmann, Dibelius and Schmidt, they had worked on the basis that textual forms could be stripped back to supposedly purer, more original, forms which would give a less redacted view of events and of the contents of Jesus' preaching - as opposed to those things as reshaped by redactive editors called evangelists. However, in the closing decades of that same century it became clear that this approach, and the criteria that developed in tandem with it, criteria which sought to distinguish or even isolate Jesus from his surroundings so that he might be something distinctive from them, were prone to some fairly obvious flaws. By the end of the century a scholar such as Dale Allison (in his book *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*) could pronounce criteria mostly useless and say that we do history "with our imaginations" in a remarkable turnaround within a discipline at one point seemingly obsessed with finding a methodical way to the truth. This opposite pole in historical Jesus research was exemplified most starkly in John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.

Since those two outstanding books, both scholars have themselves had something to say about memory and its effects upon gospel tradition, however. For Crossan, it was the fourth chapter of his follow up volume, *The Birth of Christianity*, titled "Does Memory

Remember?”. For Allison it was the opening chapter of what he styled his final historical Jesus book, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, History*, which was titled “The General and the Particular: Memories of Jesus.” I covered Allison's work in some detail in an earlier chapter of this book (“Deconstructing Jesus”) and there I found him to be quite radical in terms of the limitations of memory to recall detailed information or (re)construct Jesus’ specific history from gospel sources. I also noted that he had some quite radical things to say about our simple inability to know “what happened” in regard to Jesus. His suggestion that “The fallibility of memory should profoundly unsettle us would-be historians of Jesus” was one that both earned my respect and seemed appropriate to the literary sources referred to - and no less so because Allison is a scholar who does come to historical conclusions about Jesus. Indeed, the rest of *Constructing Jesus* is Allison doing exactly that. It is just that Allison is not going to carry on doing that pretending that this criterion establishes one thing, and that the reliability of another gospel detail - which is imagined to be supplied by some convenient “eyewitness” - can establish another thing. Allison, instead, plumps for the veracity of the Jesus tradition more widely conceived to remember and correctly transmit broader messages without historical anxiety over specific detail in its recoverability - or to say that, if this broad sweep of tradition be wrong, that the whole is useless and Jesus is lost to historical study.

Meanwhile, Crossan, in his chapter, had provided several examples of memory being wrong, where it was verifiable one way or another, of people being increasingly, and unjustifiably, confident in their false recollections of the past and of stories *becoming true* simply because they were repeated enough and so believed. (“You don’t remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened.”) But Crossan also did

something else in that chapter. He asked the crucially important question of on what theory of memory can we say something is right or something is wrong? How can we use memory theory to sift, or even decide what is, history in the gospels? Below, I hope to try and at least address such questions.

1.

Let us begin our journey through memory research as it has been applied to the historical Jesus and the gospels with someone who thinks it can tell us quite specific things about history and, ultimately, of course, about Jesus. That person is Robert K. McIver in his book *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, the latter place always seeming to be where many scholars come to find their “authenticity” in historical reconstructions of Jesus. McIver himself is concerned with “eyewitness memory”, “transience and the reliability of long term human memory”, “personal event memories”, “collective memory” and “suggestibility and bias” amongst other things but I want to focus on his “conclusions” chapter at the end of his study in particular here because I want to highlight where he thinks such study of memory leads to.

Here it is immediately very noteworthy that he thinks the subjects he has discussed can be used “to form a final assessment of the authenticity of the Gospel traditions”. This strikes me as a bold claim. McIver, as Richard Bauckham, to whom I will come below, has an interest in “eyewitnesses” and so he highlights that “the first three to five years would have been the most significant period for the formation of stable long-term memories about Jesus in eyewitnesses” (he has graphs for this that chart memory decay rates earlier in his book) and he argues that some eyewitnesses “would still have been alive in the period that the Gospels were likely to have been written”. Based on his

memory research, which includes earlier experimentation, McIver concludes that "It is safe to conclude that the memories of most eyewitnesses thirty to sixty years after the crucifixion would have been as reliable and complete as their memories three to five years after it." He does not answer the question of if memory research demonstrates there was a crucifixion to remember in the first place, however, or if such research can distinguish "memory" from "fabrication" - if that distinction even be useful. That he seems to have simply assumed! Memory, for McIver, seems more a matter of its possibility for either "error" or "authenticity" and that as two poles on a measuring scale.

McIver finds "collective memories" to be a stabilising factor in relation to oral traditions. He notes that "the essential elements of collective memories resist change" in tandem with an argument, brought in the early 1960s by Birger Gerhardsson, that "Jesus, like other first-century teachers, would have used repetition and memorization as one of his key pedagogical methods of instructing his disciples". But is McIver jumping to conclusions here? Talking about things a generalised class of people might be imagined to do is not demonstrating Jesus, or tradents of tradition about him, did it. Saying that "Human memory serves well in preserving the meaning and trend of events" is not to establish any specific gospel event as a genuinely historical event or as a memory. We must here ask if assuming history and then chatting about "memory" in relation to it is a legitimate procedure to establish that we are talking specifically about history in the first place - and this is especially true when we have a literary category, i.e. fiction, waiting in the wings to take up the slack. McIver, in his conclusions and throughout his book, assumes the history and then applies memory research and memory theory to it as if that was all one had to do to authenticate history in the gospels. In his focus on "eyewitnesses", "collective memory" and "pedagogical methods" he wants to introduce

factors brought over from memory research as part of a rhetoric of authenticity and reliability in the gospel traditions - in their "meaning and trend" if in no other ways. Yet the question of identifying memory precisely as memory, rather than as something else, is not addressed and history, and so memory, is assumed instead.

So what to make of McIver when he says as part of this rhetoric that it is "possible to form a description of [the gospels'] qualities"? McIver argues that:

"the teachings and doings of Jesus were preserved by mechanisms that tended to accurately transmit and preserve them, insofar as orally preserved materials can be accurately transmitted and preserved. The reliability of the written documents that eventually grew out of these oral traditions stems from the intersection of the collective memory of the earliest followers of Jesus, eyewitness memories, and the process of repetition and rehearsal that constituted the teaching methodology almost certainly adopted by the surviving disciples and other early Christian teachers. I would go so far as to describe the teaching traditions as carefully controlled oral tradition."

In other words, McIver argues for "gospel authenticity" - which essentially means historical verisimilitude - because they are based on eyewitness memory, cross-referenced by collective memories and transmitted by pedagogical methods intended to maximise human memory's performance. But there, we may observe, he seems to be working back from the content of texts *as received* and justifying them based on a generalised imagined past which gives rhetorical support to the gospels as we have them. Yes, to be sure, McIver allows for "errors" that "might have been introduced at every stage of the formation, transmission and preservation of these traditions" but he

fundamentally does not think such processes cut the heart out of the text of the Synoptics *as we now have them*. Memory, we may imagine reading McIver, does scratch the surface and does have effects upon the whole, particularly in matters of detail, but it doesn't fundamentally change the whole or the direction of travel. In a way much like Allison, then, McIver believes the generalities of oral tradition, should they survive the first couple of years, remain fundamentally stable thereafter whilst remaining "vulnerable to error" but not to wholesale change. In this respect he can say that "even the details that are wrong are consistent with the general course of events" although he does admit that, whilst some details are almost certain to be wrong, we can never be exactly sure which details these are likely to be. But what matters, thinks McIver, is the possibility of radical change in any case and "Radical change that is inconsistent with reality is almost never found in collective memories. Nor should one expect to find such change in the narrative parts of the Gospel materials". Or so he maintains.

So McIver, in his summary conclusions, offers this three-pronged argument for Synoptic authenticity: eyewitnesses, collective memory and pedagogy. So:

"it can be concluded that, like most products of human memory and despite all the frailties of such memory, the Gospels should be considered to be generally reliable. If the evidence presented thus far may be relied on, then—at least for the apophthegmata, the parables, and the aphorisms—the burden of proof should lie with those who wish to claim that a saying found in the Gospels is not from Jesus or that an incident reported about him did not happen, not with those who assume its authenticity. Human memory is a remarkable facility, and the traditions found in the Synoptic Gospels may be considered to be a product of its effectiveness."

In McIver's work memory has become so *reliable*, and the Synoptics have been assumed to be so *based on such a constructed idea of memory as fundamentally reliable*, particularly when eyewitnesses and pedagogy are involved, that "the burden of proof" is now imagined to fall on people disputing them - at least when it comes to sayings of Jesus or reports of incidents reported about him. McIver's book, despite a few concessions which are best imagined as but flesh wounds, does not result in the death of the historically imagined patient. The Synoptics live on as reliable memory, authentic historical witnesses to fundamentally historical events - in their trends if not in every detail. But McIver, in his procedures, has *assumed* they are history and then used memory research to substantiate them as that, a clear case of an apologetic use of rhetoric. What, on the other hand, McIver has not done is either show how such research demonstrates Synoptic texts *are* memories - and so historical - or show how or even if memory research could be a tool used to identify "memories" in the first place. We must here be clear that all McIver says about the various types of memory and their reliability, or in how they shape recollections of the past, could be true but the Synoptics could still be fabrications whole and entire. This is because without a means to identify memory specifically, without an argument which can say "this is memory and this is not", it will all seem to be rhetoric arguing for an outcome arrived at other than through the insights of memory research and memory theory. That neither memory research nor memory theory can, in fact, do this is the elephant in the room.

2.

I move now to consider two papers by April DeConick, one more experimental and a second more theoretically conceived, in which she applies her insights to the Gospel of Thomas. In the first paper, "Human Memory and the Sayings of Jesus" - taken from the

book *Jesus, The Voice, And The Text: Beyond The Oral And Written Gospel*, edited by Tom Thatcher, - DeConick is concerned to press ahead with an experimentally led research program and she bemoans the fact that all too few biblical scholars have actually carried out their own experiments into human memory as a fundamental part of their research. (McIver, just referred to, is one of the few who in fact has done such research.) Instead, they have often been content merely to rely on theory, or even their own imaginations, rather than the results of actual experiments with results collected from real people. DeConick, on the other hand, reports that as part of her teaching on parables she has for many years habitually recited her "Parable of the Lottery Ticket" to her students and then, at the subsequent class, and without warning, asked them to reproduce it for her in writing. What strikes me about this exercise is that even if it be argued that in the case of Jesus things would have been repeated and learned, as McIver actually just argued, or if it be said that Jesus repeated his parables many times giving regular witnesses chance to learn and get used to the meaning of them, this cannot be true for events which, by their very nature, may only have happened once and in such a way as even eyewitnesses would not have experienced said events as "things I need to remember". Real life, we may observe, does not happen like that. Often, we only subsequently realise that something should be remembered or only then does it gain importance as something to be remembered. This is to say that memory is often more a case of accidental remembrances than deliberate ones and, understandably so, in the context of later events or questions or narrative which give them a contextual importance they didn't have before. So when DeConick reports that her students usually complain that no one warned them they would need to remember her parable, she is actually making the point that real life does not come with a series of "remember this-es" attached.

What results might we expect from DeConick's homespun experiment? She reports that no one, not a single student, has ever reproduced her short 28 word parable exactly, word for word, in writing. Most of them, however, have faithfully reproduced the gist of it. Remember, DeConick's students had no warning they would need to remember her parable so what is being tested is their individual short term memory. DeConick reports herself unsurprised by her own experimental findings and suggests they fit in with the research of scholars of orality and oral memory such as Milman Parry, Albert Lord, Eric Havelock, Walter J. Ong and John Miles Foley, all leading experts in the field in the second half of the 20th century. She summarises her results in terms used by Kenneth Bailey as "continuity and flexibility" which means "the main lines of the story cannot be changed at all" even if the words aren't exactly the same as, in DeConick's case, they never yet have been. This, however, raises the question of what would be "the same story" and what would we regard as the same story being told? A verbatim recitation of exactly the same words in the same order? Apparently not, at least not if we have the experience that the same story has, in fact, been told. In DeConick's terms, the "faithful gist" can be regarded as an individual retelling but a retelling nevertheless. She quotes Bailey in his own research with oral societies in the Middle East in this sense when he says "By telling and retelling, the story does not evolve from A to B to C. Rather the original structure of the story remains the same but it can be coloured green or red or blue."

DeConick reports, as a result of her fairly simple classroom exercise which she has repeated many times, that her confidence has gradually eroded "in traditional approaches to and explanations of similarities and variations among the early sources for Jesus". In particular, late 20th century verities about such things, which were too

based in literary models, find themselves in need of reconfiguration as a result and specifically in terms of a “remapping of scribal/oral culture” in the ancient world. Indeed, DeConick can charge that her classroom parable exercise highlights that “an enormous facet of orality and scribality... has yet to be taken seriously by biblical scholarship: the role that human memory plays in the process of transmission in rhetorical cultures dominated by orality.” It is DeConick’s conviction that “a successful understanding of the ways in which Jesus traditions were transmitted will require a firm grasp of how the human memory operates” and this is not least because:

“Even after their initial scribing, [Jesus] traditions continued to be performed and transmitted without the aid of texts. Thus, the written texts were affected by human memory, since their scribing may have been based on a memory or performance or remembered version of another text rather than on direct copying from a written manuscript.”

This explanation, some would argue, could account for differences in sayings or stories about Jesus where, in the recent past, purely literary reasons, scribal reasons, would have sufficed. Such thinking introduces the real possibility that such differences are not merely to be explained by scribal copying or theories of strict literary relationships but the simple operation of human memory in oral cultures instead. In layman’s terms: people can remember similar stories and sayings, stories and sayings about the same things, but without them being exactly the same or even having the same point.

At this point, DeConick wants to get psychological on us and this becomes important to me in that the subject now is “memory distortion”. “Distortion”, in this connection, is a

word that I do not like from my hermeneutic perspective - albeit, as it will be explained, that this word has a specific use within the field of cognitive psychology that discusses this aspect of human memory. "Distortion", to me, suggests something that, without being subject to distortion, might be pristine, original, pure, an "in-itself". The signal I get, in other words, from talking about "memory distortion" is that the suggestion might be forthcoming that there are, or might be, pristine, non-rhetorical, non-interpretive, "pure" memories to find if only we could get rid of the pesky distortions. Distortions, as DeConick discusses them here, revolve around "the relatedness effect" - in which memories fuse with memories of similar experiences -, "the interference effect" - in which events before and after a remembrance will affect that remembrance -, and "imagination" - in which content for memories is rationally "suggested" by the mind such that these imaginings are contextualised as memories themselves.

This, by itself, seems to marry up with "distortion" as it was used by Rafael Rodriguez in my previous chapter and so suggests that it is a matter of what goes into the interpretational aspect of memory - for memory, let us be in no doubt, is an interpretational matter. This could be contrasted with the approach of Bart Ehrman in my last chapter who, in a way like me only more so, seemed to imagine something "undistorted" there to find behind memory. In Ehrman's case, it might be argued, this is what he wanted to find and memory acted, for him, as an obfuscating problem to be defeated. With Rodriguez, and now with DeConick, it is more a matter of how memory as interpretation affects those things which are subject to its processes, processes which are, in themselves, the vehicles of memory itself. In other words, there can be no "undistorted", non-interpretational memory. "Distortion" is the means to remembering, the process *by which* anything is remembered, rather than the suggestion that there

could be something undistorted there to find without distortion. "Distortion" is, then, a way of talking about how memory works, shaping that which is remembered, rather than being a problem to be overcome in the same way that "interpretation" is not something that we would wish to remove in order to enable understanding - because interpretation is the process *by which* we understand.

Important here, then, is DeConick's introduction in her essay of the research of Sir Frederic Bartlett from the 1930s who wanted to test students' ability to reproduce a presented short narrative. He asked a series of students to read a short North American folktale twice and then reproduce it. What he noticed in the results of this experiment was that the tale immediately became much shorter and lost a lot of detail - DeConick describes this as being "condensed to a bare skeletal outline" - but then it developed a fairly fixed form. Details here and there may have been added, ones meaningful to contemporary concerns, and strange things, such as words, were swapped for more familiar ones. Indeed, in my own appreciation of the results of these findings I feel it would not be inappropriate to argue that the retellings were "familiarisations" of the folktale reproduced such that the tale became more comfortable for the teller to tell or more domesticated.

So this was a matter of a general scheme being remembered, perhaps described as a "general impression" of the story, but the style and verbiage of the story was rapidly transformed. New material could be invented and added and detail from the original would only be retained if repeated within it or if it was a singular aspect of the story itself. The sequence of the story could also be changed depending on how the reteller identified with the story in itself. DeConick reports that Bartlett concluded from all this

that “human memory is a (re)construction and that this (re)construction is a social act.” Human recall, then, memory, “includes more than what we actually perceived,” as DeConick puts it, filling out what is meant by “distortion” and showing how such a thing is not meant in any negative sense. “Recall is in part imagining, and the details [are] drawn from many sources,” as she continues. Memories are “constructive in character” as DeConick quotes Bartlett himself. What all this suggests is that, in the act of memory, material takes on “a form acceptable to the social group transmitting the material.” A verbatim reproduction is not thought important and neither is it achieved.

DeConick then reports on how she set about organising a couple of slightly more complex experiments of her own “to address the problem of the operation of human memory in the transmission of Jesus traditions.” These were carried out in tandem with a cognitive psychologist and a pool of 44 test subjects. They had the character of pilot experiments to determine if the results would warrant even greater experiments which would generate statistically significant findings. Her experiments focused on four specific questions:

1. “Are there characteristic memory distortions... and verbal agreements... that occur in real life recall that likely affected the process of passing on traditions about Jesus?”
2. “What are the variations and verbal agreements that arise in different media environments: oral to oral, oral to written, written to oral, written to written and written sources retained?”
3. “Do certain memory distortions and patterns of verbal agreement occur in certain of these modes of transmission?”

4. "What might these memory distortions and patterns of verbal agreement mean for our understanding of source dependence and composition in the ancient world?"

I repeat DeConick's questions there because I believe they are vitally important questions if we want to appreciate the gospels, intra- and extra-canonical, as the major sources for the historical Jesus. To appreciate them as properly and fully as we can it is vital we get as full a picture of their nature and character, and of the processes that shaped them, as it is possible to get. Here this is not, or not even, a simple question of their truth or falsity but of their form and shape and of the mediums through which they have been transmitted. It is a matter of how these processes of remembrance and interpretation convey their contents and, as they are conveyed by them, how they transmute them. It is also, of course, to confirm that "distortion" is not the inevitable process of growing falsehood in the contents of that which is transmitted but an understanding of the process of how events, in their remembrance, are transformed yet also retained as meaningful remembrances in a changing ever-present. As DeConick puts this in her essay, it is a matter of "instabilities" but also of "stabilities".

DeConick utilised a short saying, a parable (both slightly modified versions of texts from the Gospel of Thomas) and a miracle story (from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas) in her experiments. (The test subjects were students drawn from varying subjects and so knowledge of either Thomas should not be assumed.) As with her classroom exercise, she did not tell her subjects they would be required to remember anything again at a later date, in this case, one week later. Her initial experiment was to either hear or read these three texts and then go away and either speak them into a voice recorder or write

them down. Her second experiment was to read all three texts and then compose a short narrative about Jesus based on them with the text still available to them and with the test subjects also free to use any remembrances of things about Jesus that they thought relevant “in order to present what [they] want[ed] to say about Jesus.” As such, DeConick’s experiments tested both short term (basically immediate) memory but also long term memory a week later in the case where they were asked to vocally record or write down their remembrances of the three items again.

For full statistical details of the results of these experiments you will need to refer to DeConick’s paper directly where she reproduces several tables of results. What stands out to me, however, is that “when written sources were retained, the longest string of verbatim words in sequence [was] significantly higher than any of the reproductions relying on memory.” DeConick also found that long term memory (one week) reproductions of the material students had to reproduce “did not produce long verbatim strings”. Since DeConick concluded that, not unreasonably, it is highly unlikely that Jesus’ sayings, parables, or even events about him, were being recorded on the spot, in other words, utilising short term memory, she concluded that “exact reproductions of sequences of sixteen or more words in length is suggestive of copying from a written source”. This, I think, is a highly significant finding in terms of gospel relationships and inter-relationships. We should note, however, that even where the written source was retained there was not a 100% success rate in its reproduction and there were differences in the reproduction of the saying, the parable and the miracle story in terms of verbatim reproductions as well.

DeConick also notes that “this data suggests that the subjects who retained the written source were less willing to alter Jesus’ words than to drastically change narrative material about him” and this led her to draw the conclusion that similar, but not verbatim, narratives about Jesus in which Jesus’ words are the same are likely to be indicative of a copyist having a written source. Again due to her belief that Jesus traditions were unlikely to be based on simple short term memory, and because long term memory was unable to reproduce her test saying verbatim whilst, when the written source was retained, it was, DeConick also concluded that verbatim transmission was likely to rely on textual copying rather than oral transmission. Further, whilst in short term memory “the majority of the presented material could be recalled very accurately”, long term memory, at only a week’s remove, “demonstrated a great loss or decay in the retention of material.” Another notable finding is that *deletion* was a much more common phenomenon in the performance of memory than *addition*. DeConick concludes that “even moderate expansion of the presented material is not the norm in any of the memory environments.” Where things were likely to be added it was in the one week memories when it seems that similar things were conflated in memory to fill out the story, for example, adding “of Heaven” or “of God” to the word “kingdom”. Finally, a *paraphrase* was a notable finding, especially in relation to the test where the written source was retained. This also had the possibility to include materials integrated from previous exposure to stories about Jesus and this was done in a contemporary way. DeConick conjectures that this was so subjects could “more easily modify or explain material that was for them uncomfortable or unknown.”

What does all this mean for actual Jesus traditions? I will come to that shortly in the context of DeConick’s applications to the Gospel of Thomas but here DeConick suggests

it means that Bultmann, and the form critics, were wrong because they had the wrong assumptions in work which was based on theory rather than experimentation. Bultmann conceived of traditions that Christian tradents expanded and developed - and so that could, in theory, be shrunk back to their "original" forms - where, as experiments show, the truth is more that they are condensed and remodelled until they become either fixed so that they can be passed on with little variation, they become liturgical or they are written down. DeConick concludes that "any hope of recovering a pure originating oral form (if there ever was one) is dashed" and she says that this idea "must be tossed out." The singular occasion in which this becomes a possibility is in the hard to imagine case that things were immediately taught and passed on as things to be remembered. And there we must stress "immediately" which can only mean deliberately. Even then we would need to imagine this was done, in every case and from case to case, with 100% accuracy. "Neither of these scenarios seems historically plausible or even possible," comments DeConick. Exact reproduction, or reproduction of long strings of words, is, in DeConick's view, a matter of scribal copying not oral transmission. They are, in other words, markers of literary dependence and so she seems confident to suggest that "the synoptic problem is mainly a problem of literary dependence" in a finding that will disappoint those hoping for a new, mainly oral model for their creation. She also suggests, as one of the biblical academy's foremost experts on the Gospel of Thomas and based on this experimental research, that theories of its *literary* dependence on the synoptics need to be "put to bed". But for that we must move to her second essay to be discussed here, "Reading the Gospel of Thomas As A Repository of Early Christian Communal Memory" from *Memory, Tradition and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, edited by Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher.

In her opening to this second paper DeConick racks up several useful insights regarding memory theory and backed up by multiple references to memory theorists. Here she says that, in oral cultures, “the dominant power of the mind is memory” and this is not just a matter of individual memory but “communal memory”. This latter phenomenon is “the shared dimension of remembering” and “remembered history” and is, quoting Maurice Halbwachs, the “repository of tradition”. DeConick argues that this aspect of memory is “particularly important for scholars of early Christianity to consider when reading and interpreting the literature produced by these ancient people” and not least because such communal memory “depend[s] on shared frames of reference within a culture as it thrives on remaking the past into a history with contemporaneous meaning.”

This latter aspect of communal memory, its necessary contemporaneity, will turn out to be a vital one in DeConick’s interpretation of Thomas. DeConick describes the operation of communal memory upon that which it remembers as “reconfigur[ing] the past - its traditions and historical experiences - to make it conform to the present experiences and future expectations of the group.” The way I have come to imagine this myself is by imagining the process of remembering as a bridge between the remembered past and the imagined future. This “bridge of remembering” is the present - with its own beliefs, interpretive needs and concerns - which is something that will be *subject to change*. As something subject to such change it may be that the past is subject to reinterpretation in an act of remembering, something, we should ourselves remember, which is always a distortive, interpreting act. The past, from the view of the present, which changes as its requirements determine, may not always be seen the same way or come to say the same thing. It is, we may say, subject to contemporary reconfiguration.

"These retrospective reconstructions of the past," says DeConick, "are largely achieved by adapting old traditions and historical facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the contemporary group." They are, she continues, "pieced together like a mosaic" yet not in a way which amounts to "the sum total of what actually happened" but, rather, as "fragments of the past that have been rearranged and reconnected into a new interpretive framework, resulting in an 'original' picture that aligns the contemporary community with its past experiences and its future expectations." For DeConick this realisation acts as a means to reconfigure how we even approach such texts as the documents thought to be the products of earliest Christianity. These, she imagines, are not now primarily matters of "historical accuracy and authenticity" - pre-eminent concerns of both the religiously apologetic and the terminally cynical alike.

Instead, DeConick thinks the focus now falls on issues such as "communal identity, membership, authority, experience, interaction, and so forth." It is now no longer, for DeConick, a matter of "how accurately a text depicts what actually happened" - which, whilst understandable, is something hard to configure philosophically, as I have tried to show in several books, especially *The Posthistorical Jesus* - but, instead, a matter of "why a particular group of Christians constructed its memories in a particular way at a particular time." It seems to me that this idea, in the realm of orality, has more than a passing resemblance to redaction criticism in the realm of textual analysis - in that both remove their focus from an imagined reconstruction of the text's imagined historical referentiality in preference for explaining why the text says what it says by means of describing its preservers' motives and actions. Both are concerned with finding reasons for the shape and content of the received product in terms of its creators' and preservers' activities.

DeConick, thinking ahead to her theories about the Gospel of Thomas, wants to highlight that in the procedures she has described it is possible that communal groups, with their communal memories, may experience what she terms “memory crisis”. This is because “the process of recreating the past is ongoing for a community, the process is particularly responsive to societal, political, cultural and religious pressures exerted on a group.” As such, communal memories may “confront each other, intermingle, fuse, or erase each other”. In response to such phenomena, DeConick expects that there will be “mitigative” responses from the remembering community as such “pressures” need to be relieved - *but only in such a way as connection with the community’s past is retained*. Here DeConick, once more, wants to re-emphasise that “memory formations are not static but dynamic, and tied into the ever-changing present. To remember is not to re-collect, but to reconstruct, to conform constantly the presentation of the past to shifts in social morphology and situation, to pressures exerted on the group.” It is DeConick’s view that “communal memory - the repository of a group’s traditions - is continually subject to renovation in both gradual and sudden ways”.

So we come to DeConick’s construction of the Gospel of Thomas which is that an initial core of eschatological sayings was later reworked, with the accretion of a considerable amount of further material, in a more mystical and encratite direction. One may read more fully about this in her monograph, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth* from 2005 and its sister commentary on Thomas, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation* from 2006, books which I have made use of myself in constructing a Jesus which I set in the past. In this particular paper DeConick wants to give support to her theory of this gospel’s construction and subsequent

shaping by reference to theories of communal memory she has laid out here and which I have, all too briefly, highlighted above. To quote DeConick herself on this:

"Reading the Gospel of Thomas as a repository of early Christian communal memory suggests that the Gospel contains traditions and references to hermeneutics that serve to reconfigure older traditions and hermeneutics no longer relevant to the experience of the community... the community's original eschatological expectations were disconfirmed by its contemporary experience of the non-Event. When the kingdom did not come, rather than discarding their Gospel and closing the door of their church, the Thomasine Christians responded by reinterpreting Jesus' sayings, believing themselves to have previously misunderstood Jesus' intent—to have applied the wrong hermeneutic to his words. So they aligned their old traditions with their present experience, rationalizing the non-Event, shifting their theology to the encratic and mystical, and creating a new hermeneutic through which the old traditions could be viewed. This response is visible in the way in which they revised their Gospel, adding question-and-answer units and dialogues that addressed the subject specifically, along with a series of new sayings that worked to instruct the believer in the new theology and guide him or her hermeneutically through the Gospel."

It is not my task here to go into the detail of this. Rather, it is a matter of pointing out how, in the work of a biblical scholar, theories of memory, and here communal memory, have shaped that scholar's views on a historical text in its formation. In the light of her first paper DeConick had already felt confident to argue that Thomas, to be blunt, is not the result of simple later copying of synoptic texts. In other words, it is not itself simply literarily derivative in its content as read through a different hermeneutic. In this paper,

with its focus on communal memory, DeConick finds the theoretical means to argue that originally eschatological concerns become reinterpreted in a present moment of crisis, through the process of communal memory, in order to remain in connection with the remembered past but now in the pursuance of a reconfigured future. This provides a new and, importantly, *historical* way to conceive of how Thomas comes to be, and comes to be what it is, that takes account of the processes of human memory. To be clear: DeConick now imagines that:

"It would not mean that the sayings in Thomas represent the words or perspective of the historical Jesus, sayings largely unadulterated by later Christian doctrines. To the contrary, it would mean that they represent an accumulation and reinterpretation of remembrances of Jesus' words which have been accommodated to the present experiences of an early Christian community. In this case, Thomas would be read as a repository of communal memory, containing not only early and later traditions, but also the reformulations of these traditions based on the contemporary experience of the community."

The point here, I believe, is that in remembrances of history, and in their literary collection and re-collection, it is not some artificial creation such as "history as it actually took place in its essence" that is driving the car. Instead, memory, as of its nature, is an interpretive business that will always be a matter of present constructions of the past and, if necessary, reconstructions of it in the light of newly emerging - or even simply present - concerns. As a result of this, we should never imagine that history, where it is a matter of memory, is ever going to be a matter of one, unchanging recitation of its events. That, we should not imagine, would even be the case for one, given community, let alone multiple communities each with their own ever-changing contexts and with

their own bridges to construct between remembered pasts and imagined futures. This, I believe, is in fact to argue for the past, as constructed through memory, as fictional - but only where that means meaningful, the past as it matters to some community, and only where that is, in actuality, the only course available in any case for intellectual beings who understand and make sense of the past narratively as a felt need. As DeConick argues, "accuracy" is here but a side issue for there is no non-interpretive way to comprehend the past and any imagined inherent description of its actuality is but a deluded mistake.

So, to use an obvious example, Christians may remember Jesus as being crucified (although, pertinently, not the ones in the Gospel of Thomas!). The fact of that is one thing. But it plays no part in what it means (Roman judicial murder or salvific event?), or how what it means might, and can, change over time ("it was a salvific event but now we aren't so sure" or "Jesus was crucified but what if he rose from the dead?"). Inasmuch as DeConick's work helps us to recognise all this it should be recommended and regarded as work of some value, an *historical* means to constructing the past of the ways in which Jesus was remembered.

3.

Someone who interacts with April DeConick's work on memory within the biblical academy, and who has an overarching interest in the beginnings of Christianity, not least in the construction of its texts, is John Kloppenborg in his paper "Memory, Performance, and the Sayings of Jesus" which was published in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10. This paper, which also interacts with James Dunn's appropriation of the work of Kenneth Bailey, to which DeConick also referred and which is perhaps what

Kloppenborg means by that kind of work which acts “as a surreptitious means to insinuate the faithfulness of oral transmission” in the abstract for his paper, sets out to show that “even in the case of the stable transmission of aphorisms, there is profound and significant transformation of meaning, due to the pressures exerted by the transmissional context.” In other words, Kloppenborg wants to argue in this paper that *context matters and context can be transformative*. Memory is not simply a matter of the recall of something pristine, but is interpretive and distorted *by its very existence in a present reality*.

Kloppenborg begins by establishing memory’s inherently constructive character, and its foibles in being that way, both referencing the work of Bartlett, to which DeConick referred in her first paper mentioned above, and the work of Daniel Schacter, whom DeConick had referenced in her second paper above. Here, the important factor is that “memory is not a recording of the past that can simply be replayed” but it is “constructive both at the level of brain function, and... at the level of social performance.” In the first of these two processes “other bits of memory with similar semantic or visual patterns, which then combine with the retrieved memory, result in memories which blend or conflate different experiences.” Kloppenborg reports that the general operation of memory, as experimentally demonstrated, shows that its processes “result in a reduction and schematizing of remembered features, which can result in turn in transfer and generalization across memories.” He then refers to Daniel Schacter’s “seven sins of memory” from a paper he published in *American Psychologist* 54.3, these being “transience (memories fading), absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence.” All of these phenomena suggest that what is remembered, due to how the act of remembering works, is never to be naively conceived

of as a neutral re-collection of events or as a simple recall of some past actuality. Memory is influenced and moulded by pre-existing ideas, may quite naturally incorporate post-event information into the construction of past events and is influenced by what other people think. In short, as Kloppenborg notes, “current beliefs and attitudes have an effect on how past experiences related to those beliefs and attitudes are recalled.” But then should we have ever imagined it was any other way? The past is never remembered straight: it is always remembered crooked. “Crooked memory” is the only memory.

Here Kloppenborg turns to the work of April DeConick which I have detailed above and also references work done by Robert McIver (in tandem with Marie Carroll), who I also referenced above, and to which DeConick herself had referred. Kloppenborg’s immediate takeaway from DeConick’s experimental findings is that they “provide a strong caution against excessive claims about the infallibility of memory – especially memory that is untutored by written documents – and the claim that members of the Jesus movement could preserve their stories faithfully, that is, accurately.” In truth, as we shall repeatedly see in biblical scholars who turn to memory studies from a conservative position, their fixation is almost always on questions of accuracy and, therefore, authority in the description of texts as “memory” or “remembrances”. This was, in fact, true of McIver himself as it is of James Dunn in his use of Bailey’s work, to which Kloppenborg will turn shortly, and Richard Bauckham, whom I will address later in this chapter, in his fixation with “eyewitnesses”. The issue, however, is not simply, nor is it even, “accuracy”, as DeConick has already explained, and neither is any kind of memory research an algorithm for guaranteeing such a thing. “Accuracy”, if this be the fixation, as DeConick’s results show, and largely in agreement with those of Bartlett, as

Kloppenborg points out, would tend to suggest the presence of texts to copy from or be guided by in any case. But even there, again as Kloppenborg points out, “even when a source text is visually present, the subject often deviates substantially from it”. What is at issue is that the recording and recitation of memories is a *constructive and distortive* matter in which “accuracy” is a philosophically naive red herring, a “bee-in-the-bonnet” concern of ideologically concerned historians triangulating their researches towards a pleasing conclusion.

Kloppenborg, of course, is one of the major biblical scholars in the world on the subject of the Q Gospel. Here he utilises DeConick’s findings to caution against the notion that lack of literary verbatim agreement between texts *necessarily* indicates lack of a written document to copy from such as when James Dunn and his former PhD student, Terence Mournet, argue for “oral tradition” over the existence of a Q document. Here we may say that whilst the existence of strings of verbatim words (DeConick, you will recall, had argued for 16 or more words) is highly suggestive of a literary text as guide or as something to copy from, the lack of these strings is not necessarily a demonstration of a lack of such a text in a situation in which people may, with high justification, feel free to deviate in the pursuance of their own purposes and agendas - and perhaps imagine that what they have just done is reproduce the remembrance in any case.

Instead, Kloppenborg notes that “DeConick’s data, by contrast, indicate that even when subjects have visual contact with source material, they are quite capable of departing from the wording of the source text.” In addition, Kloppenborg notes that in his own work he has previously argued that “one cannot assume that a given author will adopt a consistent policy of verbatim repetition or paraphrase.” Kloppenborg, on this basis, feels

free to criticise those who argue that a demonstration of literary copying requires a consistent policy on the part of the copyist. Memory, even as guided by literary sources, simply does not work like that because it is constructive and so because its processes are inconsistent in their operation since they are being guided by such a constructive intelligence. It is the overall constructing which is the point and its means neither require, nor apparently evidence, a strict consistency. Important here, then, is a reference Kloppenborg gives to a paper written by Ian M.L. Hunter who states that "Lengthy Verbatim Recall occurs only in cultures where text exists and is used." You will note that this explains it as a phenomenon rather than requiring it as a consistency. Thus, Kloppenborg can gleefully note, on the basis of DeConick's and Hunter's contributions to the debate, that:

"in relation to the Synoptic Problem issue of whether Q was written or not, the high verbatim agreement between Matthew and Luke in a large number of pericopae virtually necessitates that they had recourse to a document, not oral memories; their general agreement in the relative sequencing of Q materials points in the same direction; and instances of disagreement hardly authorize us to partition 'Q' into written and oral components, still less to suppose that the allegedly oral parts represent reliable memories of Jesus."

Here again, as with DeConick, we see arguments based in memory research being utilised to affect texts and positions on those texts and, moreover, to affect our views on the relation and inter-relation of texts one with another. This shows how memory research quite specifically brings new evidence and theory to the table in order to attenuate such discussions in a way that cuts some ice and that lends a different kind of

historical plausibility to the discussion. Interesting here is an observation of Bartlett's which Kloppenborg quotes in relevance to social situations. Bartlett says that "There is social control from the auditors to the narrator" when something is recalled in the presence of, or for the hearing of, a group. Bartlett further refers, as Kloppenborg notes, to the fact that such an oral performance would also change dependent on the speaker's relationship to the audience, for example, in terms of social status. What this highlights, in a new way, is that there are *social constraints* on memory not only as that applies to individual remembrance (we remember in cognisance of what other people think) but also in terms of its public recitation and performance. This point is only re-emphasised in Kloppenborg's further rehearsal of the experiences of Maurice Bloch in a Madagascan village where the story of his trip there was quickly - within hours - assimilated by the villagers to a pattern of cultural expectations. This, as a whole, is a point that Kloppenborg has himself made before in relation to Q in his book *Excavating Q* where he argued that recitations of events are not simply shaped by some lone individual but, as community products, fundamentally by those who receive them. This materially affects what is then in fact received or what even can be passed on and we may see this fact alone as relevant, and not least when some scholars fixate on "eyewitnesses" as if they were themselves not people in community whose testimony was subject to their constraints.

A thorny question in this context is that of "*How much* do such communal memories change over time?" This, as will be obvious in a book being written about the gospels and Jesus, is a most controversial question and the answer to it will go on to shape what you can then say about such literary sources for Jesus - and even what kind of sources they then are. "Few anthropologists doubt," according to Kloppenborg, "that change -

substantial change - occurs in the course of oral transmission.” He notes thereafter that Jack Goody reports on Ghanaian communities at a twenty year remove and found that stories he had earlier recorded now contained differences that were “many and profound”. Goody contrasted these differences unfavourably - in terms of strict recitation - with things like the Lord’s Prayer or College Grace which are typically written down and learnt by heart. It is, however, pertinent to ask what kind of research is relevant to the case of the gospels and their social milieu. For example, is what goes on in various pre-literate villages in the contemporary, or near contemporary, world relevant to how people may have preserved stories in Hellenistic Palestine or the wider Levant in the years 30-130 CE? Kloppenborg adds in the observations of my own former teacher, Loveday Alexander, in relation to Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* in order to demonstrate some more relevant examples of “the same kind of accommodation of personal memory to communal expectations that Maurice Bloch’s more recent ethnography reported.” There Alexander does indeed say of Xenophon’s work that “even within one generation memory, however personal in origin, is already moulded by the literary forms and expectations of the larger society.” Literarily, Alexander goes on to say that “Xenophon’s work combines apologetic... with anecdotes... and more extended dialogues of the Platonic type.”

How one takes the research evidence for this will largely affect what one then goes on to say about the gospels and the oral processes which led up to them. For example, one may say with Roy Baumeister and Stephen Hastings, as footnoted by Kloppenborg, that communities “are careful to distinguish the invention of entire episodes in collective memory from the more common phenomena of selective omission, exaggeration and embellishment, linking/detaching of ostensibly related episodes, blaming the enemy,

blaming circumstances, and contextual framing, all of which contribute to 'group memories [as] systematically distorted in a variety of ways to maintain a positive image of the group.'" Yet, at the same time, Kloppenborg can also criticise Robert McIver, with whom I began this chapter and who relies, in part, on the work of Baumeister and Hastings, for arguing that "collective memories appear to be largely free of actual confabulation" even though, Kloppenborg charges, McIver "cites examples of outright confabulation" himself. The problem here, of course, is that those writing about these subjects in the context of Jesus and the gospels are, naturally enough, not often writing out of any love for the neutral results of disinterested science. Often, like Bauckham, as I will discuss below, or like Ehrman, as I discussed in my previous chapter, biblical scholars are writing in order to make a rhetorical case pre-programmed to arrive at a predetermined point. As those two examples show, this is not something which simply affects the Christian side of the debate as those, like Ehrman, who wish to discredit believers' claims, play that game just as much as their believing colleagues. So this issue is not to be seen as a problematisation of rhetoric as such here. Rather, the issue is who has the most convincing rhetoric.

However, this is not to say that we should not take people's credentials and biographies into account, as well as their stated, or unstated, motivations in doing such work, when we evaluate their claims. This brings us to Kloppenborg's account of the work of Kenneth Bailey, a "minister and scholar" rather than "an ethnographer [or] anthropologist" as Kloppenborg describes him. Bailey's research on communities in the Middle East has perhaps been championed most of all by James Dunn in contemporary debates about the historical Jesus and the formation of the gospels. In Dunn's subsequent application of Bailey's work he has viewed the gospels as based on

considerably more oral tradition than the formerly literarily fixated models of New Testament scholars allowed for and has argued for this tradition's ability to faithfully transmit such content which is to say truthful content. See, for example, his use of Bailey in his encyclopedic *Jesus Remembered*, discussed above by me in the chapter "Jesus Misremembered". Bailey himself, as Kloppenborg notes and as DeConick had earlier in my chapter also noted, plumps for a model of "continuity and flexibility" in the preservation of oral traditions but Kloppenborg is himself keen to emphasise that Bailey seems more interested in the preservational aspect of such processes than in any constructivity that may be involved.

So Kloppenborg analyses Bailey's research as a matter of "collective control" that "is essentially conservative and replicative rather than constructive." If one knows anything of the career and biography of James Dunn one might understand how such research might appear useful to him. It is, however, not seemingly the case that Bailey's assertions always necessarily fit in so easily with the research of others. For example, Bailey's assertion that the collective control which he sees as issuing in "faithful transmission" acts to preserve stories and recitations of events seems to conflict with both Goody's and Bloch's assertions that group interests can considerably modify such stories over time. Bailey's research has also been subject to quite biting critique, not least in a paper authored by Theodore Weeden - the title of which suggested that Bailey's theory of oral tradition was "contested by its [own] evidence" - which demonstrated, in a nutshell, that what Bailey wanted to see as informal and *controlled* was much nearer to informal and *uncontrolled*. Kloppenborg himself thinks that "with this [Bailey's] entire notion of faithful preservation of historical anecdotes is crippled" and he regards Bailey as using "inadequate ethnographic methods" such that his data "when analysed carefully,

demonstrate[s] precisely the contrary of his view that communal control ensures the accurate transmission of tradition.”

Specifically, we may here only note, as Kloppenborg himself does, that when Bailey had claimed in his research that “stories had not changed over at least forty years of transmission” this was, in fact, false. The versions of the stories Bailey referred to were, in fact, “significantly different and even the conclusion to the stories differed.” In short, then, Bailey’s “the same yet different” mantra, which Dunn has clung to in subsequent apologetic defence of Bailey’s views, finds itself in deep waters, not least when one looks at the evidence that Bailey himself presents for his own conclusions. What Dunn’s motivation is in clinging to the now discredited research of Bailey one can only hazard a guess yet Kloppenborg detects that, in the light of some fierce criticism of it, his position has shifted. Specifically, he highlights that Dunn now sees Bailey’s theory as one which “helps explain, and explain *better than an exclusively literary model*, the enduring character of the Synoptic Jesus tradition.” Dunn, then, as *Jesus Remembered* demonstrated quite fully, wants to find *oral* explanations for the formation of the synoptic tradition since he seems to have become disaffected by much more (which, perhaps and following Bailey, may be construed as much more constructive and creative) literary ones. We may only note Dunn’s scepticism towards a literary Q document as further evidence of this, a view which has failed to account for the research of those such as DeConick and, indeed, the vast amount of it from Kloppenborg himself.

4.

And so to Richard Bauckham with his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. I am tempted, rather flippantly, to refer to this book as “Jesus Must Have Eyewitnesses” because that is

certainly the impression one gets from reading what, even from Bauckham's own description of his aims, seems to be the apologetic point of it. If, for example, we peruse his first chapter, which introduces his subject and his motives in pursuing it, we find the admission that "it is hard to see how Christian faith and theology can work with a radically distrusting attitude to the Gospels." This suggests that, for the Christian biblical scholar at least, one must find a way to *trust* the gospels and this is itself indicative of Bauckham's own fundamentally apologetic motivations. Bauckham seems to find the scholarship of those who are not Christian, as he is, a threat to the ability to have such trust and he describes the results of less Christian historical research as "in all cases... a Jesus reconstructed by the historian" as if such reconstruction, inevitably in some respects personal, were a bad thing. This, we may rightly assume is indeed a bad thing when Bauckham sees it as "in effect... an alternative to the Gospels' constructions of Jesus." Here Bauckham wants to apologetically remind readers that "we should be under no illusions that, however minimal a Jesus results from the quest, such a historical Jesus is no less a construction than the Jesus of each of the Gospels" which seems to suggest that Bauckham is well aware of the constructive nature of the actual canonical gospels and, seeing this as a flaw and a criticism of them, spreads the contagion around liberally to any other historically constructed Jesus as well. Indeed, if one reads through the detail of Bauckham's book one finds that "construction" is something of a dirty word and its antidote and opposite is the word "testimony", a word which, in Bauckham's usage, should come complete with its own halo.

So with Bauckham, I am afraid, things are all depressingly familiar if we recall the story I told of Reimarus at the beginning of my chapter a couple of chapters ago. Bauckham, in my estimation, is one of those "scholars of the church" who sees his academic task as to

man the barricades of defence of the faith and, in this case, defence of the faith documents. This may be dressed up as doing better secular scholarship than others but, and this is not even really hidden in his rhetoric, it is in actual fact simply finding a way to trust the gospels that can seem to have some measure of credibility in the wider academic world. Thus, when Bauckham talks dismissively in his opening about doing “all over again what the Evangelists did” this is indicative of his belief that the gospels have already told us what we need to know about the Jesus of history. No, really, they have, and you will have to trust Richard Bauckham that this is so. Or, if we follow the thesis of his book, we will have to trust his “eyewitnesses” because, for some reason he never really manages to fully articulate, we can just trust eyewitnesses. Or is it just these particular eyewitnesses we can trust?

Yet, having read his book, and even if accepting his eyewitness claims for the canonical gospel sources, something which is certainly controversial in itself, one is left wondering why Peter or John the Elder or whoever else is claimed as an eyewitness is themselves not prey to all the vagaries of human memory or community formation of memories as they are moulded by hearers’ concerns that I have already detailed - as well as much more that I have not. One, I must say, wonders at what unspoken miracles lie behind the attempted rational reasons Bauckham supplies for the specific reliability of exactly these four gospel documents. Here Bauckham fights on two fronts, first, that of scholars claiming to do better, and more objective, history of the past than these gospels did and, second, arguing for accuracy and reliability in the case of four documents in particular. This latter concern seems to be a matter of “the kind of access to the reality of Jesus that Christian faith and theology have always trusted we have in the Gospels.” Yet, one muses, isn’t it called “faith” exactly because it is beyond empirical demonstration? One

wonders, then, why Bauckham thinks he needs the latter or, given that it is a matter of “faith”, if he can even provide it.

Here key to Bauckham’s argument and, I’m bound to say, much more so than explicit matters of oral tradition, communal memory or cognitive psychology, things which Bauckham touches on but about which he is, in my view, too ambiguous and unfortunately light on in his book, is the matter of “testimony” which gets by far the greatest amount of attention in the book, either directly or as a result of hunting for eyewitnesses to present it. One would be forgiven, having read Bauckham, for starting to think that if something is categorised as “testimony” then it has somehow stepped outside history and become something that exists in its own bubble beyond reproach. “Testimony” functions in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* as Bauckham’s means to marrying theology and history, concerns not every researcher would have and so concerns specific to Bauckham’s own social location and formation of the problem as he conceives it. Not surprisingly, Bauckham wants to point out that “testimony [is] a form of human utterance that asks to be trusted.” Indeed, later on Bauckham will argue that, because something is called testimony, we should trust it first and ask questions later! In his beginning Bauckham says that “testimony should not be treated as credible only to the extent that it can be independently verified.” How convenient this all sounds when one wishes to promote a wonderworking Son of God who is claimed to have died a salvific death and been resurrected back to life again! We should not use our critical or historical faculties and procedures to interrogate this compound idea, claims Bauckham, instead we should simply believe eyewitness testimony about it as if this, a few distortions and exaggerations aside, were accurate, trustworthy and true! The point for Bauckham here is exactly the matter of “reading the Gospels as history” and all else is rhetoric to that

purpose. His many chapters attempting to link “eyewitnesses” to specific gospels are all only in pursuance of finding credible people to present the testimony which, in his book, does all the epistemological heavy lifting.

So the fundamental question here in Bauckham’s whole approach - aside from the details of his argument - and I find the approach much more interesting than the detail - is if “eyewitnesses” and “testimony” can actually take us where Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* wants us to go. Is “eyewitness testimony” a categorisation which, all by itself, indicates a veracity that is more unimpeachable than other kinds of historical witness? Does the fact of someone being an “eyewitness” lead to more “truth” - whatever that is in historical context - than if we had reports second hand or from the “communal memory” that Bauckham seems mortally afraid of in his book because the latter is much more anonymous and prey to form critical charges of being unreliable and constructive? How can “eyewitness testimony” resist the social pressures upon it which are constitutive of its form and content and so even be distinguishable from the latter phenomenon as if there were pristine individual memories we could contrast with anonymous, communal ones? Why should we trust “testimony” and contrast it with the processes of historical verification? What counts as “true” in history and what does interpretation have to do with this? All these and many other questions apply and it seems to me that the answers to many of them indict Bauckham’s appraisal of the effects of communal memory research, the transmission of oral material and the shape and content of the gospels that Bauckham shows himself to be so concerned with in his book. In particular, we must insist, even “eyewitnesses” with “testimony” *must* be prey to all the effects of the human condition and context upon memory and oral traditioning processes as well as observations to the effect that the narrativisation present in human

forms of understanding is a form of constructive fictionalisation. We, even eyewitnesses with testimony, always tell the story crooked and, indeed, have no ability to tell it straight.

So one wonders, then, at the point of Bauckham arguing that, in his book, he will “be arguing... that the Gospel texts [but, of course, only a very specific four gospel texts!] are much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is currently envisaged in current scholarship.” This, if readers have been following closely in this chapter, will seem to have comprehensively missed the point, that what those traditions and memories even are is not simply up to the eyewitness, a person who is prey to all the vagaries of memory and community, and which he cannot avoid, and which, I submit, Bauckham, in his fixation with testimony, brushes over in an apologetic manner with the zeal that only his care to substantiate the gospels as substantial history can account for. So what if “The Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount”? So what if they are based on the reports of “eyewitnesses”? So what if they are “testimony”? So what if “the period between the ‘historical’ Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths, [meaning] the usual ways of thinking of oral tradition are not appropriate at all”?

These, I conclude, can only be the arguments of someone who has, in a predetermined way, set out to construct (which is deeply ironic) an argument for the gospels as truthful, accurate and reliable in the face of criticisms of the same and this is demonstrated, not least, in that most things Bauckham states as positive assertions in his book are often

not simply controversial but also highly contentious. On my own reading *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* reads as special pleading which mostly ignores the insights of other biblical researchers on the subjects of memory and oral tradition *except as they can be used to facilitate a predetermined argument for the gospels' accuracy, reliability and so authority.*

So if it here be suggested that Bauckham's book was first published in 2006, before much research in the biblical academy was published on these matters for which Bauckham would have to have had accounted for, I would point out in response that a so-called "updated" edition of the book was published over a decade later but which had *still* not accounted for and incorporated the insights and observations of such research. As such, Bauckham seems to be intent on making a case in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* rather than solving a puzzle or providing all appropriate historical contextualisation. At the end of it I am no clearer on why I should trust "eyewitnesses" in particular or why "testimony" is any particular guarantor of either historical knowledge or historical truth, particularly in non-fictive ways. (Perhaps, I muse later in the edit. Richard Bauckham would like to riddle with the case of former British PM, Boris Johnson. He was certainly present as "eyewitness" at certain key events in 2020 and 2021 in British public life yet would anyone insist we must believe his account simply because he has "testimony" and was an "eyewitness"?)

5.

An aspect of the integration of memory research into historical Jesus and gospel studies that I have not yet touched on is the matter of how this affects how history is then done by those who take part in it and how "the doing of history" may then be conceived of by such people. Another way to frame this is in terms of assumptions or theoretical

frameworks which then seem either justified or unjustified to those practitioners actively engaged in the subject. Ultimately, as Chris Keith argues in a two part review of "Social Memory Theory and Gospel Research: The First Decade" in volume 6, issues 3+4, of *Early Christianity*, this issues in that perennially most controversial of issues: the reliability of the gospels. This, as was shown above, is of primary importance to Robert Mclver and Richard Bauckham, two of a number of (seemingly almost always) Christian scholars for whom reliability, trustworthiness, accuracy and so authority are always the point and often the purpose of their studies. In contemporary times what memory theory has done, whether cognitive and psychological or social and anthropological, is challenge and perhaps even fatally wound the attachment of gospel scholars to form critical methods, methods which were often sceptical and minimalist in their results. I would like to take some time now, guided by Chris Keith's review, to discuss memory theory and how it affects how Jesus and gospel scholars do, or should do, history in the light of it and how this has changed the way the discipline is being seen.

A first subject to address here is that of the "criteria of authenticity" which, towards the end of the 20th century and certainly into the 21st, took a serious beating. Ironically, this was after John Dominic Crossan in his *The Historical Jesus* had made one of the most concerted attempts in the 20th century for a discipline constructed on the basis of methodological principles and agreements and that sprung from form critical verities about texts and their imagined development. Crossan wanted a discipline in which all of those taking part in it could at least agree on what was important and how to go about the practice of the discipline. But he was to be disappointed in this basic hope for at the same time there were others, such as Dale Allison, who said that rules and criteria were inevitably flawed and that "imagination" was, therefore, a more useful tool. Where

Crossan had pleaded for the means to do “biography not autobiography”, others were sceptical that there even was such a thing as a methodological way to the truth or to historical knowledge - or even that methods, any methods, had guaranteed results as a consequence of their use.

When we come to criteria of authenticity in this context an issue immediately strikes us: that they seek to distinguish between “authentic” and “inauthentic” in the Jesus traditions in a way that, as we saw when discussing April DeConick’s work, may not be relevant to work concerned with memory at all. When working with memory, and when considering its context as a matter of social formation and present social constraints upon memory as it is transported through history, the notion of it being either authentic or inauthentic becomes muddled in a way that the practices of Form Criticism would not appreciate. This is primarily because in that latter kind of study one of the points of it - and, of course, one of its major assumptions - is that one can separate out the historical kernel from the redacted Christian product.

This idea, however, is fundamentally challenged and contested by social memory theory which insists, as Chris Keith puts it, that “all memory is inextricably bound to the social frameworks of the present that enable the articulation and conceptualization of the past. If this is the case, then the assumption that scholars can separate and recover historical reality from individual or group interpretation of that reality is problematic.” Keith here seems to say, rightly in my view, that the past, in terms of socially-formulated memory, is in the form of its ever-present construction. We may say, then, that the past can only be what present constructions of memory allow it to be. It is simply not the case that it can be neatly dissected into the original bit, which is historical, and the added bit,

which is what others make of it. History, as constructed by memory, is a holistic thing which brooks no such easy dissection. All historical experience is a “mediated” thing and nothing “unmediated” is recoverable, a hermeneutical insight which reminds us that interpretation creates fact rather than fact creating its interpretation. Since the deliberation of scholars is also a matter of interpretation that creates fact, what needs to be realised is that “criteria of authenticity” are, thus, really not operating in accordance with how human beings appropriate and make use of the past or even with how they seem to understand it, i.e., narratively, at all. Memory theory has, therefore, helped scholars to come to their senses on this matter and, consequently, numerous scholars going into the 21st century have eschewed the use or, at least, overuse of authenticity criteria due to such a fatal flaw. In their place, a new realisation that interpretation, and accounting for it not merely as a phenomenon but as an inextricable process of historical thinking, has been brought to life.

What this means for Jesus and gospel studies is effectively a new practice of historiography which encompasses both a change of practice and revamped frameworks of thinking, ones that I am happy to describe as both more hermeneutically concerned and more hermeneutically interested. All this comes from what Keith calls “th[at] rather simple observation about the inseparable nature of past reality and present interpretation.” What this means is that “history” and “memory” are not in opposition even as these two items can be defined in varying ways, ones that can be both more and less helpful for historical study. For example, where “history” is defined as that which must be recovered from “memory” it fundamentally misunderstands what memory is and falls back into the false form critical notion that memory can be dissected into fact and interpretation. However, what is important here is not such false distinctions that

concern themselves with “whether there is a conceptual, heuristic, distinction between the actual past and interpretations of it” but, instead, “(1) the role of interpretive categories in approaching that past and (2) what ‘approaching’ the actual past actually entails.” All this moves away from the atomising tendencies of Form Criticism which were noteworthy for regarding sayings and stories in their own bubbles of isolation as they each drifted discreetly through history in receipt of modification by those who came into contact with them. Such naive and false assumptions must now be abandoned for the new holism which memory theory brings to bear.

Chris Keith argues that what he terms this “new historiography” in gospel studies, that which “therefore grounds historical Jesus enquiry in the past as portrayed in our extant sources”, is based on four key concerns which are involved in “applying memory-based theories to historical Jesus studies.” These are

1. The actual past
2. The impact of the past
3. The role of interpretive categories in historical research
4. Applications of this research to particular problems in historical Jesus research

Let us take a look at each of these in turn.

When we ask about “the actual past”, an abstract and theoretical notion, to be sure, a fundamental question to ask is if this is an actual thing there to find. Some, we may say, imagine that it is, and others imagine that things are more hermeneutically complicated than this. This, of course, is an issue of epistemology more widely conceived and I have

already argued in the past that, along with their Christianity, many biblical scholars come complete with their philosophical realism and positivism as well. All this results in us having to ask, if we are reflective enough, whether we can claim to talk meaningfully about “the actual past” at all and what connections to such a past our narratives and formulations of the past have in relation to it. There, it goes without saying, a discipline that *wants* to talk meaningfully about such a past will certainly be able to generate motivations and arguments to propagate such an intention and this is clear to see in many books and articles that claim to talk about a Jesus figure set in such a theoretical “actual past”.

Yet, in the end, this is the question of if human historiography has the ability to posit an “is” of the past, to be indicative, to “tell it as it was”, and, for myself, I find such notions philosophically naive which has issued, instead, in a Nietzschean, fictional turn in my own conception of these things. The actual past, according to Chris Keith, all acknowledge as equally inaccessible. Therefore, it seems to me, all must equally acknowledge that such a past, if it is “recoverable” or “understandable” (these are equally epistemologically configured terms and so your epistemology, or lack of it, will attenuate what you mean by them) at all, is only as a doubly interpreted past, as a past interpreted through history and as a past interpreted by us. This is also the case even where scholars imagine to find a “Jesus behind the gospels” which will still be a “Jesus behind the gospels as interpreted through history and by us”. I call this a fictionalising process and its product fiction - and that without using fiction to mean “not true”. Indeed, I believe the truthfulness of fiction to be one of the most interesting things about it. My view on “the actual past”, then, is that no such thing exists which is not interpreted as such and, therefore, that is not fictionalised by the human intellect’s fictionalising processes which is what we call

"understanding". In this respect, a quotation Chris Keith uses from Ruben Zimmermann strikes a chord with me:

"Es gibt keine Historie jenseits des Textes. Aber es gibt Historie durch den Text und als Text."

"There is no history beyond the text. But there is history through the text and as text."

Perhaps, then, the best way to theoretically and hermeneutically conceive of this is as "a re-presentation of the past in light of the sources", as Chris Keith puts it, and this puts archaeological metaphors such as "excavation" that have been used in the past of historical Jesus study very much in question.

This "re-presented" past may also be thought of as a "commemorated past" and it is in this that scholars seek to account for the inertia that an imagined "actual past" has had upon history (for no one should be suggesting that a past we do not control does not affect history as if we "make it all up"). This is to conceive that events in the past have consequences both upon those in the past affected by them and upon the future from this past's point of view. Thus, we should not imagine, when thinking about the impact of the past, that in "re-presenting" or "commemorating" what such scholars have done is set up a narrative in opposition to an "actual" past from which it can be distinguished. This, yet again, is only to fall back on false, form critical distinctions between fact and interpretation, inside and outside, inherent and added, or a more philosophically conceived "thing-in-itself" and descriptions of that thing. In social memory theory as it has been applied to the gospels and Jesus, at least, Chris Keith argues that such a remembered past honours the notion that the past only comes to us as something that

history itself shapes which, once again, emphasises that, for all of our false conceptions and dissections in theoretical terms, there is nothing but an interpreted, historicised past there to find. Thus, when studying the impact of the past, we are also studying the way it has been interpreted as a thing that is interpreted - and, in that, always interpreted from a present. So the fundamental insight of social memory theory here is that:

"the new historiography insists that any given present community, as well as the Jesus tradition it transmits, is itself constituted by the received past. Thus, scholarly enquiry does not stop at observing coinciding elements of the Jesus tradition and community identity, but also asks programmatically about how the inherited past places pressure upon, and even forms, those present frameworks in various ways."

This disrupts the form critical notion of objective actors, unformed themselves by historical processes, who can determine, with "yes or no" simplicity, the authenticity or otherwise of historical data in the gospels. Such an insight would also apply equally to either gospel writers or modern historical Jesus scholars and is to argue that all equally are historically formulated beings with historically specific constraints upon their understanding and knowledge-creating faculties. This, in turn, is to suggest that not only are we all in receipt of the past in the impact of its events but that we are all ourselves products of the past's multi-various impacts.

Chris Keith makes a very important point when discussing the third of his four items for discussion, i.e., "the role of interpretive categories in historical research". His point here is that "this memory approach does not predetermine how a historical Jesus proposal

must explain” the existence of “the Gospels’ interpretive categories” as a part of their research. He makes this point as some charge memory research is merely the latest “trendy” way to justify the gospels as reliable history, a charge which, in my view, some users of it are certainly guilty of. Yet, as Chris Keith amply shows, this is neither the way most scholars making use of memory theory in Jesus and gospel studies have utilised it nor is memory theory itself pre-determined to act as an algorithmic verification of the gospels’ reliability and so the historical accuracy of their depictions of Jesus. Keith, indeed, quotes himself from elsewhere in affirming this when he says “This methodology does not comment upon or assume the historical reliability of... [gospel] perceptions at the outset” and so, as Keith quotes Alan Kirk, “These [mnemonically-shaped Jesus traditions] give us no royal road to the historical Jesus.” So we may say that it is not a conclusion of memory theorists in Jesus and gospel studies either that such theories are, at last, the way a discipline verifies and authorises the evangelistic accounts, nor that memory theories and memory research actually, and inevitably, end up doing that.

Here we need only point to Dale Allison in *Constructing Jesus* as one pertinent example of a Christian scholar who utilises memory research but remains critically aloof regarding the veracity of gospel stories and their detail overall. Allison, in fact, proclaims that the discipline as a whole may always lack the necessary purchase on gospel contents to ever, with authority, pronounce upon their authenticity and particularly their accuracy. And he is not alone in this as Keith shows in numerous quotes and references in his article. In short, reading the gospel texts as a series of remembrances does not mean that one can “presume to know exactly how the events memorialized in the texts really took place” - as Chris Keith quotes Hübenthal. These texts, and their mnemonic contents, as we might now suspect, are all still entangled in all the matters of *interpretation* that we should

imagine them to be. Indeed, we should think of these things as interpretation as a matter of their very constitution rather than as things that the interpretive strategy of memory theory can finally anoint as “the truth of the history” in some imagined essential way, something which lends the gospels a new sheen of historical accuracy in the process.

All this leads us to ask, in addressing the fourth and final issue Chris Keith raises, what memory theory can actually do with the historical texts that are much of our source material for historical views about Jesus. Keith himself lists work by Anthony Le Donne, at academic and popular level, which addresses the historical issue of Jesus’ supposed saying about destroying the Jerusalem Temple (did he or didn’t he say it?) and work of his own which addresses the question of Jesus being remembered as scribally literate or illiterate in canonical gospel sources (which, of course, can’t both be right). To this work we may, of course, add that, already mentioned, of April DeConick in the extra-canonical Thomas which engages memory theory to historically explain the shape of a gospel whole and entire and that of Kloppenborg, which I didn’t go into above, but which argues, amongst other things, that “as tradition moves from one social domain to another, we should expect not only alterations due to the vagaries of memory, but also alterations that are due to the varying social registers in which the tradition is performed.” All these examples show that memory theory is a theory which, if applied to gospel sources, helps provide answers to genuinely historical questions although it is perhaps the case that it will never necessarily supply answers as precise or definitive as we would like. To expect this, however, is actually to misconstrue the study of history whole and entire and perhaps in a manner which imagines it is about fixed and incontrovertible facts rather than a matter of plausible, yet still arguable,

interpretations of events. Memory theory, sadly for some, can unfortunately only help with the matter of generating a historical plausibility - albeit we should watch for those who use it as a blunt instrument in an attempt to justify things they would never doubt for a second without it in any case, things such as "the reliability of the gospels" which says rather more about them than about memory theory.

Such "reliability" is the last thing I want to address here in the context of Chris Keith's article for it seems to me that when we talk about gospel "authenticity" this is not the same as to talk about either the gospels' "accuracy" nor, necessarily, their "reliability". We must also, in the context of memory theory, ask what, if anything, it has to add to the context of such a discussion. However, that "the reliability of the gospels" has been the major point of contention in the introduction of memory theory to Jesus and gospel studies no one should doubt. Neither should anyone be surprised by this because, at least since Reimarus, this has been exactly the question at issue. This, indeed, was exactly the issue Reimarus raised by positing the very possibility of a non-evangelistic history for Jesus. So it is no surprise that today we can see solid scholars with decades of sober academic credibility in the discipline, people like Richard Bauckham, referring to those who want to offer imagined "historical" alternatives to the gospels' recitations of history as if that very task was coterminous with junking the gospels as history. For such people it seems that historical study of Jesus and the gospels results in an either/or: either the gospels - and only the four canonical gospels - tell the history of Jesus... or the gospels are discredited and useless and must be cast aside - and Christian faith with it. In fact, the logical conclusion of Bauckham's stance, and his historical case in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, is that everyone should become a Christian. In this it is not really the case that scholarship on oral traditioning processes and memory theory substantiate the

historical truth of the gospels and, as I have already said, I believe that Bauckham's interactions with both only go as far as he needs them to to justify his predetermined conclusions. So we may not say, in any case, that memory theory, or the results of researches into memory, "verify the truth of the gospels".

Instead, the issue is that there will always be scholars who *want* to verify such truth or, once more, canonise the gospels as "reliable" or seek to eulogize their "accuracy" in at least populist if not always very philosophically sound ways. Memory theory, as I have had cause to mention several times already, and as several New Testament scholars openly confirm in their own work, is actually quite neutral about what is and isn't historically true. It is itself but a tool in the hands of interpreters and it only goes where they want it to go. If you want to use it to prove the reliability of the gospels you will have the opportunity to do that and it will not resist you. If you want to do the opposite, it will provide opportunities for that too. The fact to remember, however, is that memory theory cannot "prove" any remembrance false anymore than it can "prove" any remembrance true. But, even in expressing it this way, a naivety is revealed in those who conceive of the issues in such a manner. Such people *still* linger in a form critical world more concerned with facts than interpretations. It is only the latter which have any meaning and no fact itself means anything without an interpretation to contextualise and activate it in a semantic sense. But, more than this, such a backward viewpoint fails to recognise that we are hermeneutic, storied beings who understand by means of interpreting. It is this that memory theory seeks to honour and to illuminate.

It is in this sense that I think "authenticity" is actually the crucial category when addressing the historical Jesus and the gospels as historical entities. "Reliability" and

“accuracy”, to be blunt, are nothing other than the foibles of those for who “that it actually happened” is a function of their veneration of certain books and the canonised sayings, stories and orders of events within them. Such people, I think, live in a world in which, they imagine, Reimarus had never existed to even imagine that something else might be the truth. They put all their eggs in the canonical gospel basket and make it their hill to die on. It is my unasked for view that not even their faith requires them to do that; historical study certainly does not. Yet it does reveal that, for such people, all authenticity in the gospel accounts is tied up and located precisely in their imagined reliability and accuracy. For such scholars one must equal the other two and a lack of one negates the other two as well in an “all or nothing” hermeneutic.

Yet what memory studies does, as it interacts with this kind of biblical scholarship, is honour the contents of the gospels *regardless of their accuracy or reliability*. This is because even if the entirety of their contents be false memory, and so not referential to actual acts in the past, they can still nevertheless be “true” in the sense that the contents of the gospels are still the products of history and still references to an actual past which gave birth to them. This is to argue that “the past” is actually always about more than a list of things that happened and a list of things that didn’t. It is about why people think the things they think and act the ways they act and believe the things they believe. Christians believe that Jesus was the son of god, crucified on the cross and risen from the dead.

Historically, that may or may not be true. But the gospels that report such things are important regardless of the truth of this because, in real history, there were actually people who came to believe it and write about it. Thus, the gospels have the authenticity

of being faithful to this historical development, and the expression of such beliefs, regardless of their historical referentiality. Here the gospels' "authenticity" is not bound up with either their "reliability" or "accuracy" where this is tied to their strict referentiality. A literary way of looking at this is to say that a story is not only true if the events it recounts really happened. Indeed, we would think people somewhat culturally philistine who did think that. What memory theory says is we don't have to think that way because memories, by their very nature, are important and interesting in themselves, regardless of their accuracy or reliability. To disagree with that assessment is to argue that the gospels are only interesting if, and only if, their historical references are reliably and consistently accurate. For myself, I would call that a poverty of thinking and a lack of imagination.

What memory theory establishes, as Chris Keith notes, is that "memory can be both reliable or unreliable". No one, I take it, would dissent from that view. So "social memory theory," as he continues,

"is a tool for understanding the process by which groups conceptualize their individual and communal pasts from the position of the present (itself constituted by the received past). And – importantly – historically accurate and historically inaccurate social memories were subject to the same mnemonic processes in terms of formation and articulation. Social memory theory is not, therefore, in and of itself, a tool that establishes or pronounces memory as historically accurate or inaccurate."

Chris Keith's analytic comment on this description of social memory theory is that "Theorizing historical accuracy is more difficult than stating generalizations of memory"

and in this he points out that utilizing such theoretical resources to arbitrate on “accuracy” is actually a case of an agenda seeking tools to prove its own predetermined assertions. That is indeed what it is, as is the case with those of the opposite point of view who want to prove the gospels false. My point is that this is entirely the wrong paradigm to proceed with in historical study of the gospels, with or without the use of memory theory, since the gospels are not merely, or in fact even, matters of true or false but, instead, matters of the history of those who wrote them down and why. This is to say that they are matters of interpretation before, and always before, they are matters of the “facts” they claim to constitute. Indeed, even such “facts” as they claim to refer to are useful, whether they are true or not, in helping us to understand the real historical people behind the gospels.

Chris Keith refers to this as “a distinction between historical accuracy and historical situatedness” in a way which seeks to distance memory theory from a use which is merely concerned with ascribing memories of the past to a pile for true memories and a pile for false ones. In such a scheme, of course, the true ones are thought useful and the false ones are thought useless. Chris Keith, however, would not agree with this and so he suggests that this is a problem because:

“nothing is entirely detached from history, including lies and false memories. Although it may be true that some group memories have scant (or no) basis in the historical event that they claim to portray, this means neither that they have no basis in “an historical event” nor that they have no grounding in the reception-history of the event they claim to portray. Historically accurate and inaccurate memories alike take shape in particular socio-historical circumstances. And these socio-historical circumstances, in one way or another, emerge

from prior socio-historical circumstances. This point reveals a great failure of form criticism and the criteria approach to the historical Jesus – the failure to ask how the interpretations of the early Church emerged from a historical progression that began with Jesus."

This is to argue, from the perspective of memory theory, that even if memories are completely wrong they are not, thereby, concomitantly completely useless. In fact, whether right or wrong, they are still useful. There is, thus, a much bigger picture to history, from the aspect of memory theory, than merely the true/false binary, reliability or accuracy. This is the perspective of authenticity where such a thing is decoupled from anxieties tied up in certainty of knowledge about past events. Thus, "the methodological deficiency that the new historiographers in Jesus studies seek to overcome" is "that one can trace [a] memory to the historical Jesus or... that one can trace [a] memory to the early Church's theological imagination" as if this were the binary choice available.

Instead, "The historical progression itself needs a historical explanation that accounts – to the best of one's ability with the limited evidence – for how the progression could have proceeded from the historical Jesus to any one reception of memory concerning him." The point here, I think, as Chris Keith notes of the work of Jens Schröter, is that "Jesus historians must account for the interpretations of Jesus that exist in our sources, but... neither those sources nor any particular theory dictate how a historian must account for them." And so: "The historian's responsibility is to explain how any given instance of reception of the Jesus tradition in the extant sources reflects the pressures of the present and the past, even if that instance of reception is an attempt to subvert the ideologies of either source of pressure."

6.

In conclusion of this chapter it only remains for me to agree with the following statement by Chris Keith which, I believe, adequately summarises memory theory's usefulness to 21st century Jesus and gospel studies:

"Social memory theory's contribution to discussions of the historical reliability of the Jesus tradition... occurs at the methodological level of our understanding of the nature of the Jesus tradition, not the level of determination of conclusions about the historical Jesus."

This is to say that any *historical* conclusions we have will still be our own, will still be our responsibility, and will still be prey to our own interpretational fictionalisations. Memory theory of any kind cannot be held responsible for that but it can certainly be a tool used to help create such fictionalisations. And so "memory theory is not a replacement for scholarly historiography; it is a tool that enables scholars to perform that task responsibly in light of the extant evidence." It is a tool that helps bring out the authenticity of any gospel, an authenticity not tied to either their reliability or their accuracy.

19. The Rhetoric of a Lost Gospel

"The majority of recent analyses of Q, whether they take a stratigraphic or synchronic approach, are about Q, its composition, and the particular group it represented and not about the historical Jesus." - John Kloppenborg

It is often noted, by proponents and opponents of the Q Gospel alike, that this unashamedly reconstructed text, found now only in the arcane comparison of Matthew and Luke, does not make mention of Jesus' crucifixion or his resurrection. Should we, then, conclude that, as a matter of historical fact, neither event actually occurred as if Q had been accorded some complete and overarching veridical character over and above extant documents which record such things? The quotation at the head of this chapter from Q specialist, John Kloppenborg, stands there as a warning against such hasty, and faulty, thinking. Q, says Kloppenborg, is primarily a matter of Q itself, and about those whom it may be imagined created it, and it is only thereafter the matter of how such people remember Jesus and what that may mean for the Jesus of history.

Of course, in the history of Q studies, as Kloppenborg himself amply details in his book, *Excavating Q*, there have been those eager to research into the Q Gospel and who have eagerly gone about its reconstruction imagining that in doing so they were finally hitting ground zero and that Reimarus' vision of Jesus as history revealed him, rather than as gospels portrayed him, was about to be consummated. Yet it remains not as easy as this, as earlier chapters on the 21st century practice in gospel studies of memory theory may have intimated. When it comes to what is remembered - and at the beginning of this essay it would be appropriate to postulate that Q is a set of remembrances of Jesus - it is, first and foremost, a matter of those doing the remembering and why they are doing

these specific kinds of remembering rather than rushing to judgments about historical referentiality. This is to say that Q is, first of all, about the Q People; only latterly might it be indirectly, and interpretationally, about Jesus.

So this does not authorise us to argue, as only the presumptuous would, that, depending on which historical documents we favour, we should take them to be the truthful ones and the others, now characterised as their opponents, as the false ones. Thinking to an extreme, we may say that even if no document had recorded that Jesus was crucified he still, of course, could have been. The fact of his crucifixion is unaffected by who reports it or if anyone reports it. What it means if someone does report it, however, is that they had a reason to do so. If they build gospels upon it, as four canonical gospels do, it becomes even more interesting to ask why they do that. If, as apparently in Q, they have zero interest in it, it doesn't mean it never happened; it more likely means it had no interest as an event for those for whom this book was created in their remembering of Jesus. Yet that some group of people would remember Jesus for reasons *other than his meaningful death* is itself a highly significant and interesting phenomenon. Yet even that does not mean that "the Christians were right". It means only that the Q People didn't remember Jesus the way some other people did. "The Christians", with their canonical gospels of death and martyrdom, could still be right and, in that, two of them would be "right" in a way that incorporates all that we now know of what Q has to say. Here, as Kloppenborg puts it in *Excavating Q* at one point, Q is, in fact, "the fourth synoptic gospel".

Looked at from the perspective of Matthew and Luke, of course, Q is part of differing narratives they tell about Jesus. One of the interesting facts about the development of

beliefs in Jesus, and the writing and collecting together of books about him, is that, even where scholars argue for literary or oral connections between their contents, these books still end up telling *their own* stories. No two are the same and no one, as a general principle, has a problem with someone else writing another, different book - although, of course, everyone has their boundaries of acceptability. Q is strange in this respect, plucked, as it is, from within the midst of Luke and Matthew. It is not possible to criticise its text because it is all in the Bible and yet criticise it some do because, once extracted and displayed, as Kloppenborg and others have done in highly arcane books with numerous diacritical marks utilising complex apparatuses, readers observe that it is suddenly not telling the canonised stories of either Matthew or Luke anymore. This, in fact, is exactly the issue some modern Christian scholars have with it. Instead, it is telling its own story and, if we are to believe educated rumours about its composition, even that story may have been diverted from an earlier (but not necessarily “more original”) one itself. The problem many have with Q, then, is essentially that only *canonical* stories may be told and the suggestion, which Q prompts, as does Thomas, to which I will refer below, that other stories even existed, is received as a disturbing one even though we know, from the pages of the New Testament itself, that there were historically actual “other gospels”.

Q is one such “other gospel” and, until some ingenious scholar finally argues it away again into the history from which it was plucked, it is going to stay that way. It is the best explanation for why there are similarities between the texts of Matthew and Luke that are not due to the fact they are both referencing the text of Mark. That Q was a document, rather than some loose agglomeration of sayings material, would also seem more certain based on the evidence of memory research as Kloppenborg maintained in

my chapter above. Put simply, when verbal strings of words get long enough and/or common enough we are probably correct to assume textual assistance. In the case of Q these data are variable from quite clear examples of textual assistance to virtually no demonstration of it at all. But Q is a reconstruction and we only have two documents (neither of which have autographs) to go on. No one of sane and sober mind imagines that we now have Q, should it have existed, as it was back in the day. We do not, of course, even have any autograph of any other gospel, canonical or non-canonical, and so, when it comes to gospels as a whole, we do not know in *any* case what was at first set down for posterity. All we can do, in the end, is reconstruct to the best of our ability.

So who is the Jesus remembered in Q? This is a question, as with the reading of any book, that is as complex as you want to make it. Q, however, as with any gospel, is complicated by questions of its historical composition. Indeed, with Q in particular, it may in fact be *constituted by* theories of its composition, some of which I have detailed in previous books of my own. It is hard to read Q as a connected document with its own integrity when one is aware of such theories of its composition as those given by Kloppenborg or Burton Mack or John Dominic Crossan which argue for “layers of tradition” or “redactional phases” in the history of its transmission as a text. Yet this would not be conceived much differently if we adopted the more memory-focused language of April DeConick of which she made use in referring to Thomas in my chapter above either. There she spoke of “memory crisis” but it amounts to much the same thing: the suggestion that at certain points in past time occasions arose which resulted in the reorganisation of traditions and remembrances about Jesus in the light of then present and pressing hermeneutical circumstances in the community preserving Jesus by means of Q. What any of this language should be taken to mean, however, is not, as some

assert, that in Q “the voice of Jesus speaks” but that, instead, in Q the people who created and preserved Q remember Jesus. In this remembering it may be that their remembrances go through specific hermeneutical stages and so we, as readers of Q today, must necessarily appreciate that *as a process of remembrance* rather than as a single occasion when some unknown persons sat down to write. If it is the case that the history of Q is itself a part of the text of Q then we should not fail to appreciate this.

Q, as it is now in its recovered and reconstructed form, however, is something of an “in-between” kind of document. Whilst the document, in this what I suppose we must now call its “semi-final” form, at places seems all about a community defining itself - the speech at Q 6:20-49 would be a good example here - in other places it is certainly not shy to speak highly of Jesus as a singular figure - and in ways that will become all the more exaggerated in canonical gospel contexts. Jesus, for example, is spoken of as healing, driving out demons, as one of “Wisdom’s children”, as a prophet, as the son of man, as one succeeding John the Baptist whom John testifies to as “greater” than himself, as one who presumes to condemn religious leaders, etc., in Q. Yet, in the same form, Q is far from the “totally other” gospel of some secular group leader unconcerned with matters Jewish or religious which some sometimes claim. So it is not, at least at the point at which we encounter it as a reconstructed text extracted from Matthew and Luke, the gospel of a simple secular sage who preaches a radical equality in something which may be described as a “Cynic” mould as if this were something that could be set over against, and distinguished from, a Jesus edging towards the more familiar roles apparent inside the Christian canon.

In sum, then, Jesus, at least in the form of Q we receive through analysis of Matthew and Luke, has already started to make that journey in communal remembrance which ends up as a special and singular focus upon him in exalted roles of imagined world-changing significance and, especially in the case of the canonicals, from his very own lips. It seems to me that it is then quite easy to imagine Q as a whole as we can reconstruct it, as intermediate between something more developed like the Matthew or Luke we find it in and something more protean that we might imagine to come before it such as a sayings collection of the remembered Jesus more concerned with the content of what he said than with who it was that was saying it. In short, one way to describe this is as a transition from the content of what Jesus said appreciated in its community application to the character of who Jesus was more specifically.

But, of course, this becomes a circular process because why remember what Jesus said, if that was what the Q Community originally did, unless there was something about it, or who said it, or its impact, that was reason for them to remember it? In order for it to be memorable, or to become memorable, there must be something about its initial performances, or some later circumstance, which leads to its being remembered. This, it seems to me, is why the positing of an actual historical Jesus makes most sense because, whether one believes that Q's Jesus is genuine or the canonical gospels' Jesus is genuine or not, one must still explain why these supposed remembrances and interpretations of a Jesus figure even exist at all. Whilst, occasionally, some commenting on this phenomenon choose to come up with variations of Jesus being conjured up by some grouping, perhaps even the Q Community, out of thin air, these imaginings never appear to have any real heft or substance to them because they always seem to fall at the first fence of explaining why some group, any group, would make their particular Jesus up.

Why, we might imagine here, would the Q Community make *this particular* Jesus up? They haven't called him the Messiah (and so one thing Jesus certainly is not in Q is Jesus Christ), they haven't given him a salvific death, they haven't said all must believe in Jesus to be saved, they haven't claimed he is now amongst them as risen Lord. They have, instead, in a seemingly quite naive but totally understandable way, simply presented remembrances of a Jesus who had things to say and whom they could tie into Jewish history and Jewish understandings of their own self-identity as that had been interpreted in connection with remembrances of Jesus himself. If I may be permitted to put this another way: in Q Jesus is not Christianised but remains understood, interpreted and remembered entirely within a present Jewish frame of reference; he is here internal, Jewish business rather than a Christian upsetting of the whole world. And why would anyone make that up from scratch? Why is his invention whole and entire then a better description of the phenomenon of Q than that here a community, perhaps in a more than one stage process, remembers a real person who made an impact?

There is, in fact, another example of this in the morass of gospel remembrances and his name is John the Baptist. We find him in Thomas, Mark, Q, Matthew, Luke and John which makes him as popular as anyone in this tradition except Jesus himself. In fact, besides Jesus, the Baptizer is the only named person who appears in each of these sources. Q itself, you will note, contains no named disciples of Jesus at all which is remarkable if you think about it from the point of view of the later created New Testament and even the nascent "Church" which relied on authoritative figures who guaranteed a lineage direct from Jesus himself, something even Paul tries to establish in the preaching of his gospel, a gospel he claims in Galatians 1:12 to have received "through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Q, in its remembrance of Jesus, does not feel the

need to do this, however, which is suggestive of an intimate, perhaps rural, grouping concerned with its own remembrances as a community as something other than an evangelistic tool. In fact, is Q an *evangel* at all? (A question asked even in cognizance of the mission discourse of Q 10.) It seems more an internal document more about group formation based on past remembrance of Jesus and his words from various stages of the present, almost a “community handbook” we may say. It appears as a document in which a community talks about itself by remembering a Jesus who may have been foundational in its creation and in ordering, through remembrance, its continued present. Q, then, is a document of a community who once existed and ordered their continued existence around remembrance of Jesus as a marker of their own identity.

But they did not, I assert, do this as Christians and Q, even if left as it is reconstructed and not deconstructed into rhetorically-argued earlier versions or layers, is not a document of Christianity even in its “final form”. The people of the Q Community, if Q be their handbook or testimony, do not consider themselves *worshippers* of Jesus. They do not consider themselves *saved* by him or anything he may have done. We may make this latter claim, too, even if it is the case that Q 13:34-35 are traces of his acknowledged death and imagined translation to the heavenly realm. These, it may be observed, are not toyed with, interpreted, or developed in theological expressions of present realities as they will be throughout the rest of the New Testament and even within the gospels that swallow Q whole. Such gospels, as the New Testament, have remembered Jesus in different ways and come to different conclusions because they have different purposes.

This should neither surprise us nor alarm us for surely people are allowed to make of their memories what they will? It is just, we must insist, that this is not the significance

and the narrative that the Q Community wants to allocate to the Jesus they remember and so their particular interpretation of Jesus has an integrity all of its own that should not be judged negatively by comparison to those of others. The point in appreciation of Q is that they remember *precisely this Jesus* and not some other one. And it may be that some other one was never one they could have had the opportunity to even consider anyway. We each walk our own path with our own experiences which add up to the possibilities and opportunities of our own lives. These are the constraints which determine who, or what, we even can remember. So it would be naive and foolhardy to imagine that there is some Ur-Jesus out there to which all must conform if they “want to get Jesus right”. As far as the Q Community were concerned, they did get Jesus right - just as, no doubt, Matthew, Thomas, Mark, Luke and John would say the same. This is called *interpretation* and it means there will inevitably be differing views.

There is, however, a bump in the road for those who would argue, as I do, that the Q Community behind this gospel were a relatively small and private group of likely Galilean Jesus “remembrancers” set apart from “Christians” (a word one should always quantify of any group remembering Jesus in the 1st century). This is, as Alan Kirk puts it in his recent book, *Q in Matthew: Ancient Media, Memory, and Early Scribal Transmission of the Jesus Tradition*, a problem that looks like this:

“How can Q’s ‘otherness’ in primitive Christianity, its purported Christological and geographical separateness from other streams of early Christianity, be reconciled with its normativity... and its independent reception by such as both Matthew and Luke? Likewise, given that, in antiquity, a work’s dissemination... [was] by circulation along social networks

constituted of personal relationships, how did Q come to be transmitted... let alone receive foundationally authoritative status?’

Kirk’s problematic is that the more personal, private and separate we make the Q Community and their Q Gospel, the more difficult it becomes to see Q as fitting into the pre-eminent ways gospel scholars have imagined the synoptic gospels’ historical relationships. Make Q too different and too separate and we begin to need to ask why Matthew and Luke would ever have bothered with it or how they even came into contact with it.

But I believe we need to stand back and think about this for a moment. No one is saying that the Q Community were like that other Q community, the Qumran Community of Jewish sectarian separatists who disappeared into the desert near the Dead Sea and literally formed a community *cut off* from the rest of society. No one, that is, is saying that *this* Q Community cut themselves off from everybody else. That being the case, and if we actually read Q in detail noticing what is in it and what is not, I see little reason to believe that either those behind Matthew or Luke would have found anything to take offence at in it - and especially if they have other traditions to hand which will further and, we may say, entirely recontextualise what Q itself says anyway. We also need to remember that Luke and Matthew are both cases of books that also make substantial use of Mark meaning that they have no problem taking over and making use of other people’s literary output about Jesus in pursuance of their own particular purposes in the common cause of remembering and making use of him.

So, should we imagine that there were Jesus remembrancers of other kinds in the Galilee of which Q and its community is posited? I see no reason why not since Galilee was where Jesus and his major named followers were located and where his major public activity was said to take place. The chances that people who remembered Jesus in differently nuanced ways, some more "Christian" than others, could and did come across each other there must be rated as far from impossible, not least when even the New Testament is full of talk of "different" and, from the perspective of those writing, "inadequate" gospels. In short, "Jesus remembrance" was a variegated phenomenon and its quite reasonable to assume that people who had different views about Jesus, some more Christological, others less, met each other or were aware of each other. On the related question of Q's "normativity" I suggest we note, rather simply, that both Matthew and Luke only seem to have considered Q "normative" - let alone "foundationally authoritative" - when integrated with substantial chunks of Mark (and much more so in Matthew's case than Luke's) and garnished with other material of their own from other sources. We have little reason to think that either thought Q "normative" by itself, especially considering what is missing from Q in comparison to their finished products.

All this, of course, is to be aware that the provenance of all gospels remains a matter of conjecture. Galilean provenance for both Matthew and Mark has been, and continues to be, proposed and so the possibility for the cross-fertilisation we see in gospel development, or even for Q overlaps with Mark, is hardly the craziest theory ever invented. We must reckon, I think, with diversity in remembrance of Jesus rather than dogmatically insisting on a uniformity the sources, taken in themselves, do not bear out. Q, then, can genuinely exhibit the lower Christology, or even complete lack of

"Christology", properly understood, that some claim for it, yet still be of use to those who have genuine Christologies more in line with that we would label "Christian" today. After all, if I think Jesus a saviour whose death has been followed by his vindication by God through his resurrection, I am hardly likely to be offended by a gospel in which I am told to rely on God even if I am poor and persecuted because the one who spoke such a thing was regarded by someone else as one of Wisdom's children. Diversity speaks of creative compatibility and I believe this is a much more historically realistic way to explain the past than insisting on a dogmatic "they all believed the same thing" which is actually a very present insistence that they must only be allowed to have believed the same thing, the canonical thing.

Thus, when scholars such as Burton Mack argue that originally Q developed out of a much more Cynic-flavoured core group of sayings denominated as Q1 to which a Q2 layer of much more apocalyptically-flavoured material was added, I have little problem with this - although, as noted elsewhere (see my last chapter of this book), I find the Cynic ethos rather more eschatological, but in a different way, than Mack would like to find it. Could Jesus originally have been a character who looks much more like a Jewish Cynic than he does inside the Christian canon? I think we have warrant, in the analysis of Q, for thinking so. Q, as I read it, clearly is a document that developed and it developed in a way that the Q Community preserving it found to be coherent in itself - at least from their present. Indeed, we may see its later incorporation into other documents beyond its control as part of a trajectory that makes some kind of sense - at least from the end of that process looking back. Perhaps the Q Community even became the Matthean Community as some professional scholars have conjectured. Such a trajectory also has the character of some historical veracity to it as when, noting the insights of memory

theory, we conceive that such remembrance of Jesus was always from the perspective of a present point of view. One utterly impactful event in the history of Galilee, the imagined centre for Q as for other gospels in their formation, was the Roman-Jewish War of 66-73 CE which turned Galilee upside down. The full consequences of that conflict, and what it meant for the shaping of Jesus traditions by the various tradents of Jesus in their diversity, is still far from being exhausted by gospel scholarship generally.

20. Mark and the Invention of Narrative Gospel Rhetoric

"The existence and continuation of an oral tradition [i]s... intimately connected with its social relevance and social acceptance. Success, or more exactly, continuation of oral tradition depend[s] on the existential intensity with which the message articulate[s] and consolidate[s] the experiences of those who convey and hear the words. Primarily those sayings, parables, miracles, and apophthegms ha[ve] a chance of survival which c[an] become a focus of identification for transmitters and hearers alike. In short, oral tradition is controlled by the law of social identification, rather than by the technique of verbatim memorization." - Werner Kelber, "Mark and Oral Tradition"

The epigram with which I have begun this chapter on the Gospel of Mark, which is taken from a paper of Werner Kelber's published in an edition of the old biblical journal, *Semeia*, from 1979, is important to me in the context of Mark because it focuses the conversation not on "the reliability of the Gospel of Mark" but on the question of why Mark says what Mark says at all. The first question, why, or even if, Mark is reliable, is often the concern of those who recognise Mark as the first written gospel, a gospel, no less, which at least two other gospels, those of Matthew and Luke, seemingly swallow large chunks of whole. In Matthew's case this is as much as about 90% of Mark's material. The stakes, then, are perceived as high if it should be decided that Mark has crafted his literary product with rather more literary artistry than forensic accuracy. What Kelber does, on the other hand, throughout his forty year old essay, is point out that nothing Mark writes exists without the logically prior and historically-shaped phenomenon of oral tradition, a thing, claims Kelber, controlled by "social identification" and something not to be confused with the activity or logic of writing.

And the point here, of course, is that Mark did write. It was the writer of Mark (who, to save time, I shall persist in calling Mark even though this is an authorial fiction and various scenarios can be imagined for the gospel's creation, including by committee and utilising a scribe) who decided what to put in this narrative text in the context of the audience he had in mind. It was he who decided the order of events, what mattered enough to be in the text and how it should be shaped - and so, necessarily, what that text might be about. It was he who, quite artificially, decided where to start and where to finish. All this remains true regardless of if you imagine every word of Mark to be imprinted with historical veracity or if you imagine something much more artificial than that. The notion you should dismiss, however, is that Mark in any sense just "wrote it like it was". This view simply cannot be maintained if one has any literary insight as to the composition and arrangement of Mark as a narrative text. Such thinking neither honours Kelber's thought that much of the content of Mark had an oral life prior to being concretized in text nor honours the concept of narrative text as a fictional arrangement of events with its own sense and meaning. Whatever else we think, then, that Mark "wrote it like it was" is the one thing we should not think.

Kelber gets to the heart of this in his paper which primarily focuses on the assumptions of Form Criticism, especially according to Bultmann, the distinctive and different interests of the redaction critic, and the difference between literature and oral tradition. He emphasises that *before* Mark there was speech, oral material, which is subject to its own laws and constraints. These Kelber contrasts with the naive assumptions of the Form Critics, powerful throughout most of the 20th century in biblical studies, which think of the oral as progressing towards text, a backwards view which judges what we have as the inevitable result of what came before. For example, consider the following

excerpt from Kelber which issues as a direct retort to Bultmann himself from one who has studied oral culture:

"Overall, a paradigm of the pre-canonical, synoptic tradition emerges which is at variance with Bultmann's model of persistent growth toward the gospel formation. Not only is it not possible to recover the pure or original oral form amidst the ebbing and flowing of oral tides, but the very concept of an "original form" contradicts the facts of oral life. Variability and fluidity, evanescence and unpredictability—despite a formulaic mode of expression—characterizes the pattern of oral transmission. With a multidirectional bearing constituting the major trend of the tradition, a veering away from simplicity toward complexity can at most be considered but one of many tendencies. To view the oral mainstream of pre-Markan history as an unbroken trajectory toward textuality betrays the logic of hindsight, giving credit to Mark's oral ancestors that is due more to Mark himself."

The point here, I think, is that those preserving sayings and deeds of Jesus in oral memory did not have Mark, or the formation of Mark, in mind when doing so. What was preserved in that memory was subject to entirely different forms of constraint. Mark himself merely propagated his book on the back of what that historical process funded him in regard to the needs he had in the narrative he supplied. Kelber himself adverts to "controversy stories (Mark 2), parables (Mark 4), miracles (Mark 4-6), apophthegms (Mark 10), and logoi (Mark 13)", noting that "Their presence in cluster-like density betrays Markan indebtedness to the oral habit of hoarding like experiences." It should be clear, then, that before Mark there was pre-Markan tradition. Indeed, Kelber can go further:

"The simple linking together of sentences by kai parataxis, the habitual use of euthys, the preference for direct speech, the predominance of the historical present, the lack of an artistically reflected prose, an incomplete characterization of the Jesus figure, the gospel's exposition as a series of events, and little enthusiasm for the abstract—these and many other features indicate Markan allegiance to the vitality of the spoken word."

But if Mark did have "an allegiance to the vitality of the spoken word" this was to be demonstrated by creating a unique (as far as we know) and new kind of (Christian) literary document - the written gospel - a written narrative about the person and significance of Jesus. This was not like the sayings or wisdom collections of material such as Q or Thomas may have been nor like the posited "Signs Source" which, some argue, lies behind part of the material that now constitutes John's gospel. Instead, Mark is a connected narrative, literature about causes for things and their consequences, and not merely lists of associative material which act as content for preaching. Mark means to say, in fictive, narrative ways, that A leads to B leads to C and he expects that, in doing so, you might come to conclusions of your own in hearing about it. Doing such a thing, of course, has consequences. How will the characters of this narrative manifest themselves in the narrative? What will readers (who were originally more likely to be hearers as the text was read out or recited) think about the people and events of the story? What meaning will the writer encode in his text? What lessons will he want to teach in the way he writes his story, a story in which the principle character, Jesus himself, was not there either to criticise or to direct? How will he do all this from disparate oral material which was never preserved to be incorporated into a text in the first place? How will oral material originally shaped by and for oral impact be changed in now being semantically

conformed to its new, narrative surroundings? Kelber discusses this new literary semantic context in his paper when he addresses Jesus' sayings in Mark:

"Jesus' sayings do not operate in the gospel text as orally living words, efficaciously and instantaneously. Deprived of direct audience participation and shorn of their power of immediacy, they have ceased to be of the same order of reality as the matters to which they refer. Their meaning is controlled by the narrative context, and they find a way to the public's heart only through the medium of the gospel's textuality."

This is to say that, in books, meaning comes from the narrative shape of the book and so we must turn to the text of Mark to understand Mark. What do we find there?

1. A very significant *incipit*: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."
2. Quotations from the Hebrew Bible.
3. The kingdom of God and the gospel hybridised (Mk 1:15).
4. A human Jesus from Galilee yet "with authority" who would imagine to enter debate about matters of religious law and make judgments.
5. A healer, exorcist and miracle worker.
6. A Jesus who wants his identity kept secret.
7. A Jesus who can enjoin harsh social conditions upon his followers (Mk 8:34, 10:21).
8. A Jesus who speaks in parables (cf. Mark 4).
9. A Jesus who sets his face towards crucifixion once he has been identified by his closest disciples (Mk 8:27-9:1).

10. A Jesus who can be revealed suddenly in his true identity (Mk 1:11, 9:2-8, 15:39).
11. The juxtaposition of power and service.
12. A Jesus who calls himself "the son of man" (i.e. Mk 9:31, 10:33).
13. A Jesus who suffers and is rejected.

I would argue that what these features reveal, and what the primary concern of Mark is in writing his gospel, is the matter of Christology, i.e. *the identity of Jesus and the nature of that identity*. This theme begins in chapter 1 verse 1 which is formulated very specifically: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We see here the description of the book as "good news" which is where we get evangel and gospel from. At the time this was an oral proclamation of the Romans, perhaps the good news of the spread of the empire or of something the emperor was imagined to have done, but here Mark makes it literary. Next, he identifies Jesus as "Christ", the Jewish messiah. In Mark's book Jesus will be a hybrid character, at times most human and at other times not (which, incidentally, makes "son of man" with its dual meaning of "human being" or "divine figure such as in Daniel 7" very appropriate!), and who he is will function through most of the text as a secret which Jesus forbids people to share. Yet at other times the truth will not be hidden that he is, in the final words of the opening verse, "the Son of God". This is a title especially some Roman emperors used of themselves (in Latin as *divi filius*) and this is Mark's point of comparison: the Emperor may call himself "Son of God" and so ruler of the world but, really, says Mark, it is Jesus.

So if we take the identity of Jesus and the nature of that identity to be the major theme in Mark how is that theme attenuated? I have already made mention of the most important opening verse which identifies Jesus as Jewish messiah and true Son of God

as opposed to the Roman emperor who only claims such things for himself (and we may note that Jesus almost certainly does not call himself “Son of God” in Mark but both Mark and others of his characters are not so shy.) A further notable use of “Son of God” comes at the climatic Mk 15:39, right at the point at which Jesus dies on the cross, when the thematically significant and strategically placed Roman centurion says “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” If you are thinking that, in the context of the narrative, it seems rather meaningful that a Roman centurion would say this right at the point of Jesus’ death as if they were somehow related, I would agree with you for that indeed seems to be Mark’s point. If we go back a few pages to roughly the mid-point of the book (Mk 8:27-9:1) we have a scene where Jesus, going north from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi, asks his disciples who people say he is, which directly addresses the theme of Jesus’ identity. He gets back various answers. But then Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is and Peter replies, “You are the Messiah” which, we know from Mark’s first verse, is “the Messiah, the Son of God.” Yet the important thing is not merely the identification there but the nature of that identification.

This is because it is only now in Mark’s gospel that Jesus openly states to his disciples that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk 8:31). Mark makes it explicit that Jesus did this “quite openly” but he only did this when he had been, from the point of the view of the book, correctly identified. He will go on to say pretty much the same words again in chapters 9 and 10 as well before the events Mark’s recalls as the final week of Jesus’ earthly life, events which symbolise true power and glory for Mark. The linkage here of Jesus’ identity and this mission of suffering and death are very important to Mark for he seems to see in them an explanation for *what*

Son of God really means. From 8:27 on in this gospel we will get multiple episodes which juxtapose the ideas of power, suffering and service. For Mark, Jesus is Son of God and Messiah but what this means is not “lording it over people”, as Mark sarcastically suggests of Roman power, but, instead, it means suffering and crucifixion. It is precisely in such suffering and crucifixion, in fact, that Mark sees Jesus’ divine sonship revealed. This is why Mark’s Jesus talks about following him as a matter of taking up a cross and following him (Mk 8:35) and says there is no point to becoming rich only to lose everything (Mk 8:36-37). Power and glory are not revealed, for Mark, in the pomp of a Roman emperor but in the suffering and crucifixion of a Galilean.

This explains, or provides a hermeneutic for, the Markan material as a whole. It explains, for example, the “Messianic Secret” motif that was long ago spotted as running through Mark where his Jesus, strangely, seems not to want people to know who he really is. But, of course, its not meant to be a secret for readers who have been boldly told from the beginning “this is the Son of God.” Readers can see Jesus described as one who taught “with authority” with the sense that this is somewhat surprising for a regular guy from Galilee (Mk 1:22). He visits John the Baptist, having been literarily introduced by his testimony to him, before, in the act of baptism, being addressed directly by a voice from heaven which, once more, refers to him as God’s Son (Mk 1:11). After Peter’s confession, Mark tells a tale of Jesus’ transfiguration into a heavenly being before Peter, James and John at which the symbolic characters of Moses and Elijah also appear. Jesus engages in consistent acts of healing, exorcism and miracle working in Mark. In addition, and programmatically in Mark 4, Jesus is a giver of mysterious wisdom in parables. All the clues are there as to Jesus’ identity in Mark as far as its readers go.

But the clues as to what it should mean for them are also there as well. For example, at Mk 9:33-37 Jesus asks his disciples what they were arguing about on the way. They are sheepishly silent for it had been who was the greatest of them, an occasion for Mark to then tell a story in which Jesus explains that the greatest will be "servant of all" - just, in fact, as Mark will show his Jesus to be. The symbol of a child is used as one without any airs or graces and an unassuming, unegotistical manner. Yet children are also not economically productive members of society and this ties in with teaching Mark provides about poverty and wealth - and what they symbolise - in his context of the identification of power and glory through his vision of Jesus. At Mk 10:17-22 we have the story of a very wealthy man who wants to follow Jesus and is invited to do so - but he must give up his wealth, and so his status in society, in order to do so. This leads into sayings of Jesus which say how hard it will be for people of such wealth and status to enter "the kingdom of God" which is Jesus' term in Mark for the transformed reality his "good news" announces. In Mark, heavenly glory and heavenly power are about humility, poverty and service rather than wealth, status and the wielding of power over others.

We see the theme portrayed again in the wish of James and John to be seated to the left and right of Jesus in his heavenly glory (Mk 10:37) yet Jesus' response, and so Mark's elucidation of his theme, is clear: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mk 10:42-44). This is explained by Mark's Jesus with the reason that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). The contrast of Jesus with the Roman emperor, and rulers of all kinds, could not be more

explicit and Jesus had already warned, in assuring Peter that there was indeed glory to come, that “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mk 10:31) in any case.

So the purpose of Mark writing his gospel was not to write some journalistic or biographical “historical” account of Jesus’ life as if he wanted to make sure posterity would “get Jesus objectively right”. If it was, he barely scratched the surface in any case and dealt with, potentially, but a few months of it - a very poor attempt indeed. Instead, his focus was socially determined from the needs of his very present community and this was the identity of Jesus, in what about Jesus that identity was revealed, and what that identity meant practically for those to whom it was revealed. Within that, of course, Jesus is also presented as addressing concerns of disciples and, indeed, discipleship for, of course, Mark’s audience for his book was seemingly Christian and so there would be questions arising. Here, the apocalyptic Mark 13 is pertinent in addressing the ever-important question for his readers of “When will Jesus come back?” - relevant, too, in the context of the Roman-Jewish war this chapter, in my view, addresses - which we see evidenced as well so clearly in the letters of Paul elsewhere in the New Testament. This section also gives a further clue as to the purpose of the seemingly curious ending to the original text of Mark at Mk 16:8 which cuts off abruptly with “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” which taken literally - as it shouldn’t be! - is self-refuting.

My own view of this ending, to which the verses after are clearly later additions moulded from other gospels, presumably created by those who didn’t get Mark’s ending either, is that it is a profoundly understandable response to a dead man, perhaps one who had

been followed and revered, suddenly being missing. That is in the first case. But in the second, in a book about the secret identity of Jesus, it is also yet another side-eye to the readers who surely know that Jesus has now been resurrected from the dead. This is not only because in Mark Jesus has plainly said, multiple times, that this is what will happen but also because Mark has similarly had Jesus addressed by heavenly voices and revealed in his “bleached whiter than anyone could bleach it” heavenly glory. Mark does not need to say “And now Jesus was resurrected - ta da!!” or have him wandering about being poked and prodded because he has laid the clues like breadcrumbs through his narrative anyway. I actually find this ending both skilful and subtle in comparison to others where anxiety about its reality leads to protesting too much and “overproving” its reality. All the clues are there in the prior words and description of Jesus by Mark and here he supplies empty tomb, angelic messenger and the “Arghhh!” moment of response.

We may note that tradition has handed down to us the proposal that Mark was written for Christians in Rome and in my appraisal of the book, and other scholarship about it, this seems quite reasonable. It certainly makes very good sense of the opening *incipit* and also the strategic Roman centurion by the cross yet also the message of poverty, humility and service as a point of comparison with Roman wealth and power. From the readerly perspective, Mark seems to be articulating the need to recognize and have faith in the identity of Jesus as Mark reveals it (here Mark’s elision of “kingdom” and “gospel” - in a way unrealistic to a properly historical Jesus - at Mk 1:15 is pertinent) and yet also to be faithful to that self-same identity when suffering comes along as in when Jesus speaks of those who will “lose their life for my sake” in Mark 8. It should not be surprising to anyone with any knowledge of the period to know that Romans were not averse to torturing or murdering Christians for sport, of course, with certain emperors

being more enthusiastic in this than others. Therefore, such talk on the lips of Jesus is not merely for effect but lends a tint of historical authenticity in respect to *Mark's* time and place. Christians, perhaps strangely to modern ears, were historically regarded as atheists because they did not believe in any recognised god and this could easily lead them into official trouble for not going with the flow of society as it singled them out as non-conformist. If we were to site the original publication of this gospel as somewhere around 73 CE, shortly after or near the end of the Roman-Jewish war of 66-73 CE, an event which laid waste to Jerusalem, destroying the temple mentioned in Mark 13 and much of Palestine with it, we have reason to imagine the anxiety this may have caused in those who claimed to believe in a Jewish messiah who was an alternative Son of God and so a challenger to the emperor. This is to say that Mark itself, and the concerns of this gospel, make perfect sense in such a setting.

It is only in being able to account for gospels like Mark in such a way, as literary products with concerns of their own and their own ways to present them, albeit they be funded by both memory and oral tradition, which takes such books seriously as historical artifacts in their own right. Jesus was not stood at the shoulder of Mark as he wrote and he was not correcting him as to what he said or did or what it meant or how to link A to B to C. This was all up to Mark himself in tandem with the audience for which he wrote and as a result of the community that had formed him in his beliefs. Such historical reasons and motivations are ultimately why Matthew and Luke will come along, in the recitation of the vast majority of gospel scholarship, and later take up Mark's text, add other text to it, and make their own gospels which have differing foci, albeit they retain much of his content. A gospel, then, is not a "telling it like it objectively was" but, rather, a "Jesus means this and this is what you should do about it". In this, Mark is somewhat like the

Jesus it portrays, a bit one thing and a bit the other, one part man, part God, the other sometimes very simple in its rushing recitation of “this happened then this happened then this happened” and yet profound in its portrayal of the meaning of Jesus’ true identity. It provides perhaps the first *gospel* portrayal of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. It is a beginning.

21. A Rhetoric of Sayings

"Even though scholars recognize that the beginnings of Christianity were pluriform, most constructions of Christian origins remain the same. They presuppose at the inauguration of the Christian era a dramatic event, a kerygmatic conviction, and a linear development, based primarily on the narrative construct of the book of Acts. The problem with this scenario is not simply historical. The fundamental issues are imaginative and theoretical: the New Testament serves as the sole framework for the scholarly imagination of Christian origins, even when scholars recognize that picture as tendentious, overly simplified, or legendary." - Ron Cameron

Biblical scholarship, overwhelmingly the preserve, for most of its existence, of those of Christian faith of various broadly orthodox persuasions, was doing just fine. Oh, sure, it had its problems and its arguments. In the area of early Christianity, for example, it argued over the centuries if this gospel came first or that one did. But it always knew what it thought was orthodox and what was not. After all, didn't it have the historically f(ounded) New Testament to guide it in what was acceptable from the beginning and what was not?

But then, in 1945, along came the Gospel of Thomas, found in a cache of documents hidden in a jar by a man digging for fertilizer. The problem ever since, or since the late 1950s when scholars finally got access to the documents, has been, for many, how to get it back in the jar again! In the roughly 60 years of scholarship since many have simply ignored it - either by not talking about it or dismissing it without any serious interaction with it. Others have looked at it so they could dismiss it with a cursory documentation of why it is heterodox or too late to be pertinent to Christian origins or simply derivative,

usually of the synoptic gospels. Many, I'm sure, wish that they could just bat it away as "not existing" as they do with the Q Gospel, a documentary hypothesis which was fairly widely received and regarded as benign by most New Testament scholarship - right up until it started being used as the basis for forms of early Christianity that didn't sound very... canonical! But, since a whole copy and, a few decades earlier, some fragments of other copies of Thomas have actually been found, the "it doesn't exist" excuse has been taken away from such scholars.

Ron Cameron, in the epigram at the head of this chapter from his essay "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of the Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins" from the book *Redescribing Christian Origins* (2004), accurately describes the impasse in scholarship of Christian origins and early Christianity since then: scholars use the New Testament as both the framework the history must fit into and the measure to measure anything scholars try to relate to it. But Thomas, as can plainly be seen from reading it, is not the same. It is a non-narrative, sayings gospel with no crucifixion or resurrection at the end and no "Don't worry, I'll be back" to reassure the readers in sight. Salvation in Thomas, if there even is any, seems to have nothing to do with "believing in Jesus" or a "sacrifice for sins" he may have made because neither are mentioned. Jesus doesn't even appear to be "Christ" here. This gospel is... different! How are our scholarly presuppositions going to deal with that?

Again, Ron Cameron details the issue succinctly:

"By privileging the resurrection as the historical starting point, foundational event, transformative experience, ubiquitous persuasion, distinguishing criterion, and decisive

category for explaining the beginnings of Christianity, biblical scholarship persists in perpetuating in its discourse a widely assumed—but totally unwarranted—conservative theological theory that has caused untold mischief in the scholarly imagination of the New Testament and Christian origins. By assuming that we already know what Christianity is, and how and why it began, scholars have concentrated on tracing the history of the tradition in terms of a diverse series of developments from a singular point of origination."

This "singular point of origination", as Cameron puts it, is simply a model that cannot account for genuine historical anomalies - from its point of view - which announce themselves in the sands of Egypt or from the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus, as had been the case with the Greek fragments of Thomas found half a century earlier than the full Coptic text by Grenfell and Hunt. So what we need is a new model which accounts for ALL the historical evidence and ALL the historical witnesses rather than just those ones that are compatible with an orthodoxy that only accounts for itself - and polices everything else. We need, in other words, to abandon the New Testament model based, as it is, on the resurrection as the uniformly foundational event. As regards the resurrection and Thomas, Ron Cameron has this to say:

"The notion of resurrection is absent from Thomas not because Thomas presupposes it as a central symbol or narratable experience, but because the metaphor of resurrection is fundamentally incompatible with the genre, designs, logic, and theology of this Gospel."

Yet if all these aspects of an actual, genuine, historical gospel (ones that can be touched and probed every bit as much as the risen body of Jesus could have been by the apostle

Thomas at the end of John's gospel) conflict with your model of Christian origins and your proposed founding event, what are you going to do?

One thing you may do, as scholars Mark Goodacre and Simon Gathercole attempted to do recently in separate books in 2012, is argue that Thomas, and so its form of belief, is simply derivative.³⁷⁵ On such arguments, Thomas is no threat to what began Christianity because it was not around, or involved, at the beginning. Instead, as texts, such scholars argue, Thomas relies on a dependent relationship to the synoptic gospels. In layman's terms this is to say that Thomas, in the about one half of its material that shows a relationship to the gospels of the New Testament, is relying on them for what it has to say. Because it is relying on them, so this argument goes, it must come after them and, if it comes after them, then it is late, probably some second century, secondary formation that had nothing to do with the beginning of Christianity. But, in any case, if such theories were true, why would we have reason to believe Thomas knew anything about the beginning anyway? It relies on other texts for its information in that case. Here the arguments of Goodacre and Gathercole are slightly different. Goodacre wants to argue more generally that Thomas is literarily dependent on the synoptic gospels whilst Gathercole wants to argue that Thomas relies on the secondary orality of these same texts. Secondary orality is a phenomenon where a text is "re-oralized" and allows for more flexibility in its later rendition as a result since the oralizing process may allow for more verbal differences than simple textual copying would. But, in the end, the claim is the same thing: Thomas copies earlier texts and so is distant from Christian origins.

³⁷⁵ See Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Eerdmans, 2012) and Simon Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Cf. Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary* (Brill, 2014).

It is Thomas expert, Stephen Patterson, in his book *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, who informs us that there are two basic rules biblical scholars use for determining *literary dependence* in the matter of biblical texts. The first of these is *verbal agreement*: if the words in one text are sufficiently similar to the words from another text then we have good reason to believe that one has copied the other. The second rule is *agreement in order*: if one text seems to follow the order of another text to a sufficient amount then we are probably reasonable to assume that one text knows and is following the other one. Of course, if we can find both of these phenomena together then that is an even better argument for literary dependence. But the point that Patterson makes most strongly there is that, sooner or later, you actually have to come up with just such tangible evidence, and to the required degree, to posit a specifically *literary* dependence. You must show, in other words, that B copies A - at least if you believe that what is going on is such literary dependence rather than common access to general oral tradition which is behind all such texts. After all, it could simply be the case that such material as we find in the synoptics and also in Thomas is simply oral tradition that was in the air at the time and both - independently - made use of it with no literary dependency involved. The only way to then prove dependency is to prove knowledge of one document - in its documentary form - by another using rules such as Patterson has helpfully described for us in his book.

What does Patterson make of this possibility, argued for by Goodacre and Gathercole, that Thomas shows a *literary* dependence upon the synoptic gospels? He says:

"Roughly half of Thomas' sayings have parallels of one sort or another in the synoptics. But when one examines this material closely, with careful attention to the clues each saying

provides as to its oral and written history within the broadest traditions of earliest Christianity, one finds little to suggest that the author who compiled the sayings collection known as the Gospel of Thomas was even aware of the synoptic texts. To the contrary, one finds a situation rather similar... to that with respect to John and the synoptic gospels."

Now in this book I am dealing with John after Thomas (see below) but here we may note that John, inside the New Testament with the synoptic gospels, is not simply like them. Like Thomas, in fact, it is both like and not like them. In terms of its wording, John is sometimes like them but quite often not. Sometimes it seems to be addressing stories they address but often it doesn't address them in the same way. What's more, the Jesus found in John talks in long discourses which is most uncharacteristic of Jesus in the synoptics. What we get in John, as here in Thomas, is a "like yet not like" kind of Jesus. This has led Johannine scholars to wonder greatly about the relationship of John to the synoptics - specifically in the case of if John knows of them, or uses them, or not, in a way very similar to the conundrum we have here. Patterson, in his forensic research into Thomas, suggests that there are three types of saying in Thomas which bear relations to synoptic versions of the same but that *all of them* "cast the argument decisively in the direction of Thomas' fundamental independence." In other words, Patterson finds no substantial evidence that "B copied A" which is what you would need to show *direct literary dependence* rather than common knowledge of similar oral traditions. Let us now look, with Patterson, at the three types of sayings Patterson finds that bear comparison in Thomas and the synoptics.

The first kind of saying Patterson calls "synoptic twins" and these are Thomas sayings which have "very close synoptic parallels". But Patterson suggests these are "twins" in

the sense that real twins are twins: they are genetically similar but, being born, they go on to live their own individual lives. This is a phenomenon I know well since my own mother - and, obviously, also my aunt - is a twin. Here what we have are sayings which, proceeding from a common point of departure, develop in ways that are their own. Patterson gives a Johannine example for this from John 4:46-54 which is a "twin" of the story of the centurion's son being healed from the synoptics, for example, as found at Matt 8:5-13. These are clearly the same story but they have each travelled their own path to different textual recitations. Examples of "twins" in Thomas would be the pairing of "seeking and finding" (GTh 2:1, 92:1, 94:1-2 - cf. Lk 11:9, Mt 7:7) or "the first shall be last" (GTh 4:2 - cf. Mk 10:31, Lk 13:30, Mt 19:30, Mt 20:16).

The second kind of saying in Thomas and the synoptics Patterson calls "synoptic siblings". These are Thomas sayings which "have loose parallels in the synoptic text, sharing with their synoptic counterparts a common structure or outline, a common thought, and sometimes key vocabulary." Again, Patterson provides a Johannine example for comparison and this time it is John's traditions about John the Baptist found in John 1:19-34. These are seen to have a sibling relationship to what we would call the baptismal traditions in the synoptics, especially Matthew and Luke, wherein Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist. Yet in John, which seems to use the same traditions, he is not baptised but eulogized instead. Here a closer verbal correspondence that "twins" would have is lacking. Examples of "siblings" from Thomas are the saying about the kingdom being within you (GTh 3:1-3, 113 - cf. Lk 17:20-21, Mt 24:23-28) and the injunction not to worry about what you shall wear (GTh 36 - cf. Lk 12:22-30, Mt 6:25-33).

The third and final category of sayings found in Thomas and the synoptics is “synoptic cousins” and these are those sayings which “have no synoptic parallels, but which, in terms of their traditional form and content, offer no grounds for distinguishing them chronologically or topically from the sayings of the synoptic tradition itself.” Again, Patterson gives an example of the type of thing he is referring to by supplying an example from John’s gospel. This time it is the story of the man healed by the pool Bethzatha that we find at John 5:1-9a. This is a story not at all unfamiliar to readers of the synoptic gospels who are well used to reading of Jesus healing people yet there is no precise copy of this story in the synoptics. It is, then, synoptic-like material rather than material from the written synoptic tradition. Examples of “cousins” from Thomas include GTh 17, 24 and 51.

What Patterson then does in his book, which is simply about Thomas itself and its relationship to Jesus, is go into forensic detail about the text of Thomas itself in relation to these three categories of material as they appear in Thomas. Unfortunately, I do not have the space in this differently focused book to do that but that is no bad thing in itself as I am all for readers doing their own research and reading the texts themselves to come to their own conclusions. What’s more, as we shall shortly see, this would also be a very “Thomas” thing to do. However, what Patterson does show in a table he provides, when it comes to the matter of the order of use of these synoptically-related sayings in Thomas, is show that there is absolutely no discernable use of any synoptic order at all. Thomas simply does not follow the order of the synoptics and, therefore, strikes out on this rule of literary dependence.

Furthermore, since Patterson believes his assessment of the material in Thomas which bears comparison with the synoptics - in terms of twins, siblings and cousins - has not provided sufficient evidence of "B copied A", he comes to the conclusion that in Thomas "in terms of material content, there is little evidence to suggest that the Gospel of Thomas is literarily dependent upon the synoptic gospels." This does not mean, by the way, that Thomas and the synoptics may never have come into contact with one another or that knowledge of one did not affect knowledge of the other. Patterson, for example, as other scholars who think Thomas largely independent, do find places where one seems to have affected transmission of the other. Books, as they are transmitted through history, being copied at this time by hand, do have lives and the order or wording in one can affect that of another as their paths cross. If one reads any detailed commentary on Thomas one will find places where this is thought to affect its text in transmission. But the fundamental judgment remains that there is no good reason, supported by copious examples of "B copied A" in an order recognizable as synoptic, for believing that Thomas is, in its parts comparative to the synoptics, simply literarily derived from them or dependent upon them. Perhaps this is why, in a review of the books of Goodacre and Gathercole to which I will turn below, John Kloppenborg came to the conclusion that neither of their cases were proven. The evidence for *literary dependence* is simply not there.

So if we are not going to site the origination of Thomas in a literary dependence upon earlier, synoptic gospels - and if we are not going to be artificially constrained by the artificial and dogmatic boundary of the New Testament - we must come to the conclusion that - historically - there were other gospels, and so other communities, of people who remembered Jesus where that remembrance was not centred on crucifixion

and resurrection and where their development is not to be described by shoe-horning it into a Lukan, Luke-Acts, type of developmental scenario. We must, in other words, come to the conclusion that Luke-Acts describes one way people remembered Jesus and developed thereafter rather than simply THE way. Here, in fact, is one reason why I am hesitant, or even averse, to describing those we find represented by the Gospel of Thomas as “Christians” or as what they give witness to in its text as “Christianity”. This, we may say reading its text, is not something they call themselves neither are the beliefs we see represented there distinctively “Christian” in any helpful sense. So I demur from the modern nomenclature of some, scholars I would agree with on many issues regarding Thomas as well as others, when they call the people behind Thomas, even as they do the different people behind Q, “Christians”. They aren’t, and that is perfectly fine. At best, they are all Jesus remembrancers because that is what they have in common.

So how to historically imagine Thomas coming to exist? What historical details in its text might it give up to give us some clues about why it exists and where it came from? One bold proposal on this has been put forward by American scholar, April DeConick. Primarily in a two part *meisterwerk* on Thomas from 2005-2006, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas* and *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, she has argued for a Gospel of Thomas in two phases; first there is a “kernel” phase located in Palestine and probably Jerusalem which, according to DeConick, centres around five eschatological speeches. However, according to DeConick’s reconstruction of the history of the document, which is based very much in her understanding of oral material and oral memory, there was then a geographical shift in the community behind Thomas which caused them to relocate to Syria. At this point later accretions to the text become

evident as well as a shift in theology rather than simply geography. DeConick suggests this is not only evident at the level of theme but also at the level of language in that, as she says, “there is evidence for an older Aramaic substratum beneath the Kernel sayings, while a Syriac one beneath the accretions.” Her conception of Thomas, then, is as “an aggregate text, a text that accumulated traditions and their interpretations over time” and that in more than one geographical place. This is known as DeConick’s “rolling corpus” theory of the formation of Thomas as a whole and is to be distinguished from some writer sitting down, starting to write at the beginning and writing until he got to the end, a conception which does not seem at all fitting to something that is basically a list of sayings in any case.

But what about this form, something which stands out when compared to other, more prominent, narrative gospels of which we may be aware? Here we may be reminded that Q is itself a list of sayings or a “wisdom collection” as it might be said in more scholarly fashion. As has primarily been shown in recent Q-Thomas debate by John Kloppenborg in his seminal work on Q in *The Formation of Q*, such wisdom collections were a common phenomenon of the times and in cross-cultural situations. In short, such a kind of literature *was* a kind of literature at this time. This, of course, was also a time in which orality was king and books were the preserve of the literate few. We can be sure such sayings as are preserved in gospels had a much more vital life as oral material that was passed on from mouth to mouth more so than it was from book to mind. In such an overwhelming oral context remembering such sayings would be of vital importance. As DeConick herself notes:

"That the sayings were preserved at all in written format is highly significant and is connected to the group's desire to retain and retrieve its memory. This means that written texts like the Gospel of Thomas served as memory aids, which were used by the community as permanent sites for the storage and future dissemination of its contents."

Yet we should not imagine that the Thomas tradents just saved their stuff in a book and forgot about it because it was now written down. It would still have been the case that it was recalled and performed a lot more orally than it was by reading it out of the book. Here something Patterson talks about in his research becomes of vital importance in understanding the *organisational principle* behind Thomas, something for which many scholars, fixated with the idea that Thomas must follow the synoptics, have always been at a loss to explain. This organising principle, Patterson shows, is *catchwords*. Over three pages in *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* Patterson lists 64 possible examples of catchwords which we can probably be sure is less than were there in previous versions of Thomas since we must remember that the only "complete" copy of Thomas we have is a Coptic translation from the 4th century. Thomas may have originally been in Greek or even in other languages in which more native catchword associations were formulated - as an *aide de memoire* for remembrance and oral performance - but which have been distorted or lost in literary transmission and translation. Yet even the list that Patterson can provide from a Coptic translation of Thomas is impressive. As Patterson notes, such catchword association is, indeed, an "organizing principle" and "the utility of this for the street preacher... is obvious." In this, such association is not a matter, then, of composing the book a certain way but a factor in the remembrance of sayings as originally oral material. This, in turn, suggests the order of the sayings could have been determined in oral retelling and performance rather than by what we might imagine as a person sitting

at a desk deciding which sayings to put with which other sayings. At any rate, the discovery of these catchwords as an organizing principle is a textual phenomenon which disrupts attempts to argue that some nefarious writer of Thomas was attempting to cover his tracks in utilising synoptic material.

April DeConick, however, wishes to interrogate this process in order to explain the whole, a whole which, to say the least, seems to incorporate at least two, quite different, sorts of material, types she has denominated “Kernel” and “accretions”. Thinking on her model of a geographical shift in community location, and of the understandable entrance of members from new social and geographical locations, she asks:

“is it not plausible that additional sayings would have accumulated in this collection in order to address th[e] needs [of new people]? As new converts joined the community, is it not reasonable that they would have brought with them new ideas and interpretations? As the Christians in this community welcomed wandering preachers, is it not likely that they would have learned 'new' Jesus sayings from them, and added these to their gospel performances? If this is the case (and I think it very probable), it would mean that the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas represent different moments in its history and might be read as memoirs of practices and conflicts that arose over time within the community.”

This, I think, makes a lot of sense and so I agree with DeConick when she says that “the text we possess is an aggregate text, a text that accumulated traditions and their interpretations over time.” This would mean, of course, that Thomas cannot then be dated to a definitive time and place - as if someone sat down one day and wrote it, perhaps copying from the synoptics as some have falsely imagined - but that, instead, it

is an agglomeration of material, likely from more than one time and place, that has come to a “final form” over time and perhaps over a number of decades. In that, however, we can still see in the material which bears comparison to that in the synoptics that Thomas, in its roots, goes far back into the tradition of oral material from which the synoptics also drew whatever else happened to it after that and whatever else was drawn into the text of Thomas by its preserving community’s wanderings, both physical and spiritual. DeConick herself conjectures that in the matter of “spiritual wanderings” the definitive event, or, rather, non-event, is that no eschatological consummation occurred such as, within the canon of the New Testament, we still see is the hope that these documents hold out. Or, in her own words:

“The main experience (but not the exclusive one!) which led to the reconfiguration of the Kernel was the Non-Event - when the contemporary experience of the Christians in Syria did not match their expectations for world dissolution and Judgement. When the Kingdom did not come, they responded by reinterpreting Jesus' sayings in their small speech book. The external imminent eschaton was collapsed into the internal immanent visio dei. So the accretions describe a mystical form of Christianity in which the believer worked not just to understand God, but to 'know' him in the most immediate and the most direct sense.”

Here a brief detour into a short discussion about Thomas and Q may be in order although, for fuller discussions, you should be aware that I will write much more about this in my last chapter. Helmut Koester writes in his *Ancient Christian Gospels* that:

“The materials which the Gospel of Thomas and Q share must belong to a very early stage of the transmission of Jesus' sayings. All of them fit well in the first composition of the

Synoptic Sayings Source. In a few instances, a saying reflects Matthew's rather than Luke's wording; in these instances, there are good reasons to believe that Matthew has preserved the original wording of Q. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas is either dependent upon the earliest version of Q or, more likely, shares with the author of Q one or several very early collections of Jesus' sayings. However, these collections are of a different character than the one used in Corinth which emphasized the mediation of secret revelation through the words of Jesus. Yet neither do they reflect a purely proverbial wisdom orientation; rather, prophetic sayings are included which incorporate the wisdom material into the perspective of a realized eschatology, centered upon the presence of revelation in the words of Jesus."

This appraisal, in general, fits very well with what we saw earlier of Patterson's analysis in that both Patterson and Koester place Thomas in the currents of oral tradition that lie behind the synoptic gospels and from which they all alike come. This is not to ascribe some cardboard cut out notion of "copying" or "literary dependence" to either one or the other as if such a thing were to ascribe superiority or inferiority to one text or another. Instead, they are coming from similar and associated oral places, each funded historically by a tradition of broadly "synoptic" sayings about Jesus which remember him in similar, but always presently interpreted, terms. In particular, Koester notes that the similarities between Q and Thomas in this respect fall mostly at the level of what would be referred to as Q1 and so the original or formative layer of Q, pushing both it and so these sayings from Thomas back to what we may regard as the earliest recoverable moments of the sayings tradition about Jesus. With this we may say that whatever journey Thomas goes on afterwards, and it will surely be its own unique journey, it also contains some of the earliest remembrances of the sayings of Jesus that we can now refer to.

Yet none of this, however helpful, helps us to imagine how Thomas might have come to be written down. New Testament scholar, John Kloppenborg, in the paper I referred to earlier which spends most of its time refuting the assertions of Goodacre and Gathercole, "A New Synoptic Problem: Mark Goodacre and Simon Gathercole on Thomas" in *JSNT* 36/3, has a suggestion though. Kloppenborg says:

"Given the data from the comparison of Thomas with the Synoptics and other non-canonical documents, we should perhaps imagine Thomas to have been composed like other school products, drawing on the 'Jesus tradition' in its variety of forms, either selecting versions of the sayings that were congenial to its interests—no doubt including those stressing 'seeking and finding', and androgyny—and adapting others in just the same way that we find commentators on Homer and Plato adapting their sources. This allowed for a complex interplay of tropes that we can conclude are drawn from Synoptic redaction such as 'the kingdom of the heavens', sayings taken from non-canonical gospels or traditions, sayings from the Synoptics themselves, and sayings that reflect pre-redactional versions of sayings that also appeared in the Synoptics."

This is his conclusion reached after an argument based on referral to secular literature of the time such as works about Plato or Homeric literature. There Kloppenborg attests to:

"the textual transmission of Platonic works and... a parallel commentary tradition that has elaborated, abbreviated and reframed Platonic sayings. Similar observations can be made of the use of Homeric texts by later authors: some of their citations may rely on the textual transmission of the epics, but others rest on the rich Homeric commentary tradition that was already well developed in the Common Era."

This, Kloppenborg thinks, leads to the conclusion that “Thomas is the beneficiary of multiple sources of information” and that is where one of them is always imagined to be “autonomous, even earlier versions of sayings that also appear in the Synoptics.” This is what ultimately leads to Kloppenborg’s conclusion that Thomas gives all the signs of being a “school document”. In this, he points to textual reasons for his conclusion such as the *incipit* “whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death”, something Kloppenborg calls “a virtual advertisement of its setting in a context where study and reflection are practised”, as well as Thomas 2 which lauds “seeking and finding” as characteristic behaviours.

Here something intriguing occurs in Kloppenborg’s argument for he mentions the frequent mention of “labours” or “toil” in the content of Thomas. Archetypally, of course, this would be exemplified by GTh58: “Blessed is the person who has toiled.” Kloppenborg argues that education and learning, also interests of Thomas, were valorized as “toil” in school settings and that “toil and labour became identity markers for schools.” Here it is learning such as “learning the interpretation of these sayings” - such as Thomas entreats its readers to do - which is in focus. Kloppenborg notes of these contexts that:

“What is socially formative here is the inculcation of a group ethos devoted collectively to the penetration of obscure sayings, where labour, puzzlement and insight become the markers of membership. Thomas displays the same interest in promoting ‘research’ into the sayings of Jesus, whether they appear to be transparent in their meaning or deliberately obscure.”

Ron Cameron is another scholar who has also noticed this. He writes:

"By imagining Jesus' activities as a model for mimesis, and by presenting his teachings as instructions to be assimilated, Thomas portrays the reader assembled in a circle of disciples around the master. Group membership is thereby depicted as belonging to a new fictive family... [but this is a matter of] the vital importance of effort in the production of meaning. The very beginning of the Gospel of Thomas, therefore, describes nothing less than a process of 'sapiential research,' in which interpretation and salvation coincide. The theme of labor that is announced at the beginning of the text permeates the discourse of the entire Gospel."

Now there is one grouping of people that I have had cause to mention throughout my discussions of Jesus and the gospels across the entire span of 25 years that also were said to valorize "toil" or "labour" and who, so Burton Mack says of Q1, at least, were said to have "schools" for the production and remembrance of sayings collections. These were the Cynics. Yet I am not here making the claim that Cynics composed Thomas. Indeed, from all that has been said in this chapter it seems quite likely that no one person, or even tight knit group of two or three persons, alone "composed" Thomas - for it seems quite likely that Thomas was not "composed" in the sense of "authored" in this way at all. Yet, in the similarities at places with Q1 noticed by Koester, in the imagined school-setting for the toil of learning the interpretations of sayings, in the content of Thomas which, in places, is interested in an ascetic and even itinerant lifestyle, there are remembrances of that which can be thought of as Cynic. This, to be sure, should not then be used to characterise the whole of Thomas which seems, as DeConick notes, a document, as we now have it, subject to change, and the need to change its orientation,

across its journey through time. What it may be that we have in Thomas, however, is a document which remembers right back as far as we can go - to communities who remembered Jesus in certain Cynic and eschatological ways near the beginning of when people needed to start remembering Jesus at all - and then went on geographical and spiritual journeys which ended up in places much more mystical, places which responded to present concerns of the preserving community yet whilst still holding as precious remembrances things more relevant to times past in the history of that same community.

PS You may be thinking "Why Thomas?" Allow April DeConick to explain:

"What is the religiosity of our earliest Syrian sources? In this literature, the human being regains a lost Paradise through his or her own effort of righteous living as revealed by Jesus, not through some act of atonement on Jesus' part. Over and over again, through story after story, the Christian is taught that he or she must become as self-controlled as possible, overcoming desire and passions that lurk in the soul. He or she is taught through discourse and example that marriage should be abandoned in order to achieve the prelapsarian conditions of 'singleness'. When this is done, gender difference is abolished and the believer can be united with his or her divine double in the 'bridal chamber'. This divine double, the person's new spouse, is in fact Jesus himself. It is Judas Thomas, Judas the Twin, who becomes the metaphor for all believers since Jesus is described as his very own Twin."

So Thomas, in an area scholars already know Judas Thomas was himself venerated in as the twin of Jesus, is, as a book:

"quite cogent with early Syrian Christianity as described in the oldest literature from the area. So any recovery of 'community' is really the recovery of the Christian community in Syria, with the knowledge that the community experienced shifts within its membership during the time that the gospel itself was composed, particularly an increase in Gentile converts and a shift to accommodate their interests."

Thomas, then, is a composite or aggregate text, the result of a shift from Palestine to Syria. Judas Thomas is its totem and exemplar because Thomas was that person especially venerated in the area as the "twin" of Jesus within what became its system of belief. By what would become Western, Augustinian standards of Christianity this seems heterodox and perverse. But not so in the Syrian East which would eventuate in Eastern Orthodoxy. One lesson of Thomas, then, is that of the constraints which condemn you to judge things only by your own measure alone as if that were the only possible measure.

22. John's Rhetoric of Testimony

"In this Gospel we have the idiosyncratic testimony of a disciple whose relationship to the events, to Jesus, was distinctive and different. It is a view from outside the circles from which other Gospel traditions largely derive, and it is the perspective of a man who was deeply but distinctively formed by his own experience of the events." - Richard Bauckham

As readers will already have seen from reading section four of my chapter on memory studies, above, I would not regard myself as a natural ally of the British biblical scholar, Richard Bauckham. However, if and when he argues that the Gospel of John is a matter of "testimony" then he finds in me a believer. Of course, Bauckham wants to go right ahead and claim a lot more than that - as can be seen from the excerpted quotation at the head of this chapter from the end of the fifteenth chapter of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* - but that is a matter for him and in that book he thinks he provides the appropriate and definitive argumentation to do so. For myself, however, my intentions in talking about John are both more modest and more immediately demonstrable in that, so I argue, they require only that you actually read the Gospel of John. So what I am going to do here is largely just read the book myself and note down as I go examples of what I regard as "testimony" in the Gospel of John. I hope to demonstrate by doing so that this book is basically constructed as considered and consistent testimony to one simple fact: the importance of Jesus.

We begin, naturally enough, at the beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This is the memorable beginning of John but this is also where the *testimony* of the gospel - and, in the original Greek,

"testimony", "testify" or "witness" words more often than not translate words coming from the root *martyreo* from which we get the English word "martyr" - begins, right at the very beginning. "Word" is a translation of *logos* and books have been written about the meaning, use and significance in the ancient Greek and Hellenistic worlds of *logos* alone. Here I am going to curtail such discussions by saying that *logos* means "the divine reason of the universe" and, you must admit, that is some kind of testimony to begin a gospel with! There's no building up to the big reveal, no hidden significance of the character Jesus, in this book. Jesus was there, with God, in the beginning as the divine reason of the universe. And so, of course, should you believe such a thing, "All things came into being through him." That, at least, makes sense if you are happy to go where John wants to take you.

But there is another aspect of *logos*, "Word", that I want to draw attention to before I progress further through this gospel. I mentioned this before, too, in my essay "Textual Jesus". This is Word as the principle of textuality - in the beginning was the textuality - at once both physical yet also semantic, meaningful, substantial. In the beginning there was something meaningful and of substance with a Jewish God who cannot even be named or imagined to have such substance within orthodox Jewish belief. That was Jesus. That is what the writer of this often denominated "spiritual" or "theological" gospel says. Words, textuality, of course, are meant to have meaning, to be of use for communicating, to "make sense", and all this can be associated with the Johannine use of *logos* here. I told you books could be written about this word alone! The more you think about it, the more you will find in the idea of Jesus as God's textuality. Without it (him) "not one thing came into being" and this can be both "light" and "life", both physical things but also both abstract symbols. And John wants you to think on such

symbols and to see in Jesus a real, physical symbol. Jesus, as light, can never be overcome by darkness, John testifies. We might add that, as life, he can never die. But the life on offer in John is not simply any sort of life either, as we shall see.

Now the prologue of John's gospel moves to mention another John, John the Baptist. In this gospel the Baptist appears only as a witness with testimony about Jesus. Here it is in a brief introductory narration (Jn 1:6-8) but later on in the chapter (Jn 1:19-34) he returns in this gospel's recitation of the events of Jesus' baptism. But Jesus in this gospel, as we have already been told, is the divine reason of the universe and why would the divine reason of the universe need to be baptised? The simple answer that John's gospel comes up with is that he wouldn't and so John simply does not report that Jesus ever was baptised although it does use traditions and ideas about baptism and doesn't avoid recognising that John *the Baptist* actually was *a baptiser*! Instead, John 1:19-34 is a tightly configured *inclusio* with the simple purpose of having John the Baptist, who we must assume as a notable religious figure of the time, as testifying to Jesus. He testifies to Jesus to "priests and Levites from Jerusalem" and later to "the Pharisees" making sure to point out that he himself is "not the Messiah" neither a returned Elijah nor "the prophet". What John the Baptist is in John, in fact, is a witness to Jesus, a human signpost whose sole reason for existence is to point to Jesus. The Christian message of Jesus as a sacrifice for sins is put on the Baptist's lips, essentially Christianising him and making him a Christian messenger with his mention of Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The Baptist's purpose is said to be, from his own lips, that of revealing Jesus "to Israel" and, in a recitation of what would elsewhere be narrated as the baptism of Jesus (but not here!), the Baptist testifies to the Spirit settling upon Jesus. In the narration of this gospel, John the Baptist testifies all this to

actual people in his time and place for in this gospel testimony it is not a matter of something that merely the book itself does: it is also something that the characters in the book do too and this is such a theme that one cannot fail to get the impression that the Gospel of John means to say that we, upon sharing its beliefs, should testify like this too. Upon hearing and believing about Jesus, one should pass it on.

But we have jumped ahead a little in dealing with the Baptist now. In between these two mentions of him in John's first chapter is a precis of John's gospel as a whole, "John in a nutshell". This is a brief summary of what Jesus did in coming into the world unknown, from the perspective of this gospel, to be rejected. Yet those who did believe in him were given a new birth "of God". John's gospel goes on to make the pointed statement that Jesus "the Word" was not merely some divine apparition though. He "became flesh". This seems a strange thing to say to us, perhaps, but it clearly attenuates some necessary meaning in a context in which some might have claimed he was a ghost, spirit, vision or apparition. John, instead, testifies to Jesus' very real physicality and so, we must assume, to his suffering just like any other physical being. And so John here says, in anticipation of what is later to come, that this was no effete game or pretence without stakes or consequences. Sacrificial lambs actually have to be killed and it hurts and so, we are told, must lambs of God "who take away the sins of the world" too. And this "flesh", testifies the writer of John, has made God, the God no one has ever seen, known.

In an incident (which to me seems wholly artificial) related at the end of John's first chapter we find the Baptist once more testifying to Jesus as "the Lamb of God", this time to two of his own followers. Naturally enough, since John the Baptist is the human signpost, his disciples go off and follow Jesus. Jesus invites them to "come and see"

where he lives and they go off with him. What follows is a section in which people we know elsewhere as members of the 12 disciples of Jesus come to know him. Except in John, with its focus on testimony, it is a matter of people hearing of Jesus, coming to meet Jesus and then telling somebody else about Jesus - who then testify to Jesus themselves - in what we can imagine as an unbroken chain of testimony highlighted here as an example of required behaviour. So here Andrew, brother of Peter, is introduced to Jesus by John the Baptist. He then goes to Peter, points out his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and then brings Peter to Jesus. Next we have Philip who is called by Jesus and what Philip does is go off to find Nathanael because Jesus is "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" - which is a very clever way to introduce the holy scriptures of Judaism as testifying to Jesus as well! We will see more of this later in the book. All in all, in this section of John, we have Jesus referred to as "Lamb of God", "Messiah", "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote", "Rabbi" (which comes from a Hebrew root meaning "great" not "teacher"), "Son of God" and "King of Israel". John is not a gospel which holds back! Its testimony, and its examples of the testimony of others, is literally overflowing.

We have already had cause to make mention of the "Lamb of God" in discussing John's gospel and it is pertinent to note that, of course, this is Jewish imagery. Tacked onto the end of John's first chapter is something Jesus is reported to say: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" which also qualifies as such imagery in at least two ways. First, there is the image of "ascending and descending" which recalls to biblically literate readers, then and now, the image of Jacob's ladder from Genesis. Except here the suggestion, or rather, the testimony, seems to be that Jesus himself is seen as this ladder, a ladder between

heaven and earth. But then there is the further biblical image of the “Son of Man”, certainly in John something we should not be shy about giving its full, apocalyptic significance such as is seen in the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel because, if you start out as the “divine reason of the universe”, then there is not really anywhere higher to go! In such statements as these on the lips of Jesus we see images from the Jewish scriptures applied to Jesus as testimony about him. Jesus, indeed, as we shall see, is slowly and consistently throughout John being integrated into the entirety of Jewish religious expression in a way which comes to mean not simply that it all points to him - which John, of course, thinks it does - but, in an even greater testimonial claim, that he, in fact, is what constitutes it! It is made of him rather than him being made of it, another way of making Jesus “the divine reason of the universe”.

Another testimonial notion in John is introduced with the beginning of chapter two which begins with one of Jesus’ “signs” which “revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him”. This first sign is, of course, the turning of the water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee and it is one of the points, in a gospel such as this, which reports “miraculous deeds” at which certain people might get touchy about “the reliability of the gospels”. But it seems to me that this is frankly absurd considering what we have had to go through in chapter one to even get to chapter two. Can you swallow all the testimony that chapter one has amounted to but now stumble at the idea of the “water to wine” swapsy trick? Do you now, having read all that John had to say in chapter one about Jesus, come to argue that all its meaning and significance comes down to whether or not Jesus actually, really did turn some water into wine at a first century wedding one day in Cana of Galilee? I would find that notion absurd. One, I think, needs to look at the bigger picture here, the picture of John’s overall testimony to Jesus, of

which such signs - testified and referred to throughout the gospel - are but only a part. Taken altogether as a whole, as, being a unified whole as a book, one must take this testimony, it comes to be a matter of *belief* whether one buys into that or not. Here Bauckham, in his rhetoric in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* would be totally correct to point out that "*testimony asks to be trusted*". Whether or not you are going to "trust", of course, is up to you. But if you accept the testimony of this gospel then turning water into wine will not be the most outrageous thing this gospel asks you to believe by a long way. From the perspective of the gospel's testimony as a whole it is just another strand of testimony - signs - that is salted throughout the text. It is another level of testimony in a book which is all about being a testimonial to Jesus.

This theme of signs is utilised in the next incident John recalls which is where this gospel places the temple incident when Jesus is reported as disrupting its activities. This activity, in the recitation of the gospel, is backed up by (narrative or historically actual?) remembrance of scripture ("Zeal for your house will consume me" - see Ps 69:9, Zech 14:21, Mal 3:1) but also by that most problematic of Johannine groups - "the Jews" - actually asking for a "sign" to which Jesus responds by claiming that he can rebuild the whole temple, should it be destroyed, within 3 days. But here, of course, if we are now getting the hang of John's agenda of total testimony from every possible angle, we may start to see in this most provocative of comments yet more testimony. "He was," says John, "speaking of the temple of his body." Its the old switcheroo! Of course, if we fast forward to the end of John's gospel we will see that not only did Jesus make this promise of a sign but he actually did it. "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe", as will later be remarked by the gospel itself. So this incident is not used as it is used in the synoptic gospels where it lies in proximity to the final events of Jesus' life in

a way in which many take it to be the proximate cause of his historical crucifixion. In John it acts as a testimony to Jesus' later vindication through resurrection, the "rebuilding" of the temple of his body, something which, not inconsequentially, can historically be contrasted with the destroyed Jerusalem temple which would have lain in ruins as this book was read out upon its initial production. No wonder "his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."

This Johannine obsession with testimony even finds its way into transitional comments in the gospel such as those found at Jn 2:23-25. Here, besides summary comments about Jesus being believed in by many due to his "signs", we get the quite strange notice that "Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone." The sense appears to be that "we", in our ignorance, knew nothing about Jesus - one imagines such that we need "signs" and all these other forms of testimony - yet Jesus, the divine reason of the universe, needs no such testimony about "us". He "knows all people" and that, we may assume, down to the most intimate level we can imagine. Such an insignificant comment, ostensibly nothing special in itself, acts as yet further means to testify to Jesus even in the mere comparison of him with everybody else, readers included.

As part of the prologue at Jn 1:12-13 John's gospel had said "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." This is posited in the gospel as a distinction between those who believe, who are born "of God", and those who don't believe and so are not. In chapters 3 and 4 of the gospel we get

further examples of such people, and from unexpected but complementary sources, in Nicodemus the Pharisee and the Samaritan woman he meets at Jacob's well in Sychar. Nicodemus is said to believe by means of recognising the significance of Jesus through his signs and this is the narrative reason for why Jesus can then discourse at length about the necessity of being born "from above" in what amounts to self-testimony about his importance and that of the gospel that is fundamentally about him and the meaning of him and his actions. Here speech of Jesus is elided very smoothly and, if one is not careful, without the reader noticing, into narrative comment on the significance of Jesus. In chapter three this speech about Jesus concerning "being born from above" becomes, by chapter's end, the writer's own comment about "whoever believes in the Son" having "eternal life" which is exactly this "born from above" kind of life that, in the gospel's recitation, is what Jesus offers.

When we come to the Samaritan woman by the well we get an inclination of what can only be described as the absurdity and megalomania of the picture of Jesus this gospel draws as part of its consistent testimony as to the significance of Jesus. In an exchange with the woman at the well after Jesus asks for a drink he tells her "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." But, of course, we readers know who this gospel believes Jesus to be and it hasn't stopped telling us from its first words. Jesus, in the context of this gospel, essentially tells the woman that if she knew that the divine reason of the universe was addressing her then she would have asked him for a "drink" in a startling piece of self-referentiality. The woman, of course, misunderstands but only so that Jesus can be testified to in the telling of the tale by his own complete understanding and, once again, in his offering of the eternal life "from above" with

which this gospel associates him. In this way, both a despised Samaritan woman (from the perspective of Jews) and, in the prior chapter, Jewish leaders, in the person of the Pharisee Nicodemus, can be brought within the veil of witnesses to the story and person of Jesus. In both cases, too, in line with the transitional comments of Jn 2:23-25, Jesus reveals that he knows all about those with whom he speaks in their lack of understanding in comparison with his own overflowing understanding. Witness here his comments about the Samaritan woman's past husbands and Nicodemus' incomplete understanding about being born from above. Yet, nevertheless, both go on to testify to Jesus themselves in any case and, in the case of the Samaritan woman, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." They, of course, in the logic of John, then go on to give testimony themselves.

John, like the synoptic gospels, including, in one case, in Q, has Jesus healing the sick. In John, of course, this functions as a "sign" and so as testimony to Jesus. Examples in John are the healing of the "royal official's" son (Jn 4:46-54), the healing of the man who had been ill for 38 years at the pool Bethzatha by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (Jn 5:1-18), the healing of the man born blind in John 9 and, perhaps archetypally, the raising of Lazarus from the dead in John 11. In the case of the royal official, he believed him and the result was that "his whole household" became believers. In the case of the man healed by the pool of Bethzatha, he testifies to "the Jews" - a circumlocutional phrase in John which often means certain Jewish leaders, perhaps with a polemical sense, yet in a way which some have seen as tending towards the anti-semitic - that it was Jesus who healed him which results in Jesus testifying, once more in seeming megalomaniacal fashion, to himself as a unique son of God - which is at least how the Jewish opponents here are imagined to understand it. Readers of the gospel, of course, are supposed to

know that it is true and so to be thought of as accurate rather than immodest to the point of madness. With the man born blind his very infirmity is listed as a testimony “so that God’s works might be revealed in him” and he thereafter testifies to Jesus before zealous interlocutors that Jesus enabled him to see in a case of obvious double meaning. In the case of Lazarus, Jesus is portrayed as seemingly allowing Lazarus to die (Jn 11:4-6) so that “the Son of God may be glorified through it” meaning, of course, Lazarus’ subsequent resurrection and that Jesus is a life-giver.

This whole latter incident is replayed in the recitation of John’s gospel as something that Jesus is in full control of almost as if the whole actuality of reality is but a game to him in his all-powerful form as the divine reason of the universe. Consider, for example, Jn 11:11 in which Jesus, out of the blue, says, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” Jesus is portrayed as knowing full well Lazarus is dead, having first allowed it to happen, and then as knowing full well that he will go down to Bethany and resurrect him. This is a Jesus not so much full of confidence as one simply in control of everything that goes on around him like some kind of Marvel superhero. In the recitation of the story both Martha and Mary, the relations of Lazarus, are, of course, allowed to testify to Jesus before others before the deed of Jesus itself speaks for him. Of course, thereafter, Lazarus’ reanimated corpse is now also a pertinent witness. No wonder Jesus’ rhetorical opponents in the gospel, who, by now, John is continually warning are seeking to kill him, exasperatedly exclaim, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” Which, of course, they did - as both writer and readers know full well. Even, in this retelling, does Caiaphas the High Priest testify that Jesus will be “one man [to] die for the people”! In such ways

does this written gospel performatively carry out words it itself gives to Jesus in the text: "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life."

A further example of the theme of testimony in John is the Jewish theme of the testimony of "two or three witnesses" which was the social and even legal standard in Jewish practice which established the actuality of an event. For example, Deuteronomy 17:6 establishes that two or three witnesses are required in the matter of capital cases in an imagined judicial situation. In John 5:31-38 (compare also Jn 8:17-18) Jesus rhetorically takes up such an imagined legal theme calling John the Baptist, again regarded as a noteworthy person of the time, as well as the "works" which he is doing and even God himself as his witnesses. Jesus, thus, rhetorically argues in these sections of John that he passes the Jewish (legal) standard for the claims made about and for him to be taken seriously in front of his rhetorically constructed opponents from "the Jews". This imagined court situation, of course, is initiated in the text by the case of Jesus healing the man by the pool Bethzatha in which the initial fault was that the man, on being healed, had picked up his mat, in contravention of Sabbath stipulations. The man himself had then said Jesus told him to do it. In effect, the rhetorical material that follows this in the rest of chapter five, including this section, is Jesus' own justification of why he is, in fact, entitled to tell people to break Sabbath rules. This reason is, of course, because he is the context for them rather than them being the context for him.

We see this all the more in the final and further "witness" Jesus calls in John 5:39-47. This witness is "the scriptures" or "Moses", the latter a circumlocutional term for the Torah, the first five books of what is today the Jewish Tanakh or the Christian "Old"

Testament. These, Jesus claims with his customary Johannine confidence, “testify on my behalf” and this is because, once more, it is not the case that Jesus points to the Torah, thought by Jews to function as the ultimate revelation of God, but because the Torah, in the Johannine version of Jesus’ narrative, points to Jesus and testifies about him. This is quite explicitly stated in the words of Jn 5:46: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” Thus, the Johannine Jewish opponents of Jesus are doubly impugned as those who not only don’t recognise the Torah as testifying to Jesus but also as ones who, therefore, don’t really believe the Torah either. This theme is then taken up, more metaphorically, in the following chapter when, after feeding the 5000, Jesus gives the “bread of life” discourse which, in a way like he responds to the devil in other gospels where bread is contrasted with the word of God, Jesus contrasts the food people have eaten with *himself* as God’s word. This, it cannot be understated, is a staggering claim to make of oneself in Jewish context. It is, in fact, a Torah usurping and recontextualising claim.

But then, in John’s gospel, claiming to replace and recontextualise the most sacred of texts is to lack ambition for in John Jesus himself claims to be equal with God. For example, we see this in the claim, made quoting Jewish scripture at Jn 6:45, “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall be taught by God.’” We see it, too, in claims such as that made at Jn 7:29 “I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me” in which Jesus claims not only to “know” God in an unmediated way completely in contrast to the way God was thought of in Judaism but also in that, as one sent by this God, he was also thought to have the same authority as God because he had been given God’s authority. Then, of course, there is the statement of Jn 10:30 “The Father and I are one” at which his hearers are reported to pick up stones ready to stone him. But, of course, this is not

the most blatant example of this theme in the testimony of John. That honour falls to John 8:58 which reads "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" in a saying which refers to the apparent self-given name of God before Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. Earlier in this same discourse, it should also be noted, Jesus had said, "If you knew me you would know my Father also," an explicit insistence that to see Jesus is to have God revealed to you as well.

Let us now jump ahead to the two part culmination of the story of Jesus, the crucifixion and the resurrection, for we cannot doubt that, in both cases, these are acts which function as testimony. How, indeed, could we not think this when one death and resurrection - that of Lazarus which, as we will see, was not exactly the same as the one yet to come - has already been the focus of testimony and the cause of belief in its historical recitation? The issue with the crucifixion of Jesus in John, however, is that Jesus is not here conceived of as just some noble peasant from Galilee. Considering the things that have been said of him - including his virtual equation with God - one is forced, as an honest reader, to ask what it can mean in John for the divine reason of the universe to be tortured and crucified at the hands of human authority having been rejected by "the Jews" which can certainly mean no less than certain leadership factions thereof? (Compare Jn 1:11 where "his own people did not accept him".) In John 12 we also see that John has a recitation of those events now known as "Palm Sunday" when Jesus is feted by the crowds sitting on a donkey. These, we are told, are "the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead" and they "continued to testify" which can be seen as a literary foreshadowing of what is to come with the death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

But in John, we must remember, Jesus is pictured as *in control of everything*. He knows “that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father” (Jn 13:1). He knows what Judas Iscariot will do. Nothing happens to Jesus here that he is not fully cognisant of, neither, with all that’s been said, could we sensibly allow that it was (Jn 10:18, 18:4). In John the crucifixion can only be a deliberate choice, one that leads to more testimony and to a “glorification” (Jn 13:31-32). But not, remembering from John 1 that he “became flesh”, a painless one. Yet we must conclude that the willing crucifixion of an all-knowing Jesus is itself testimony, testimony to the glory of God (Jn 17:4-5). But this is not the crucifixion of a pleading victim. At his arrest, when he identifies himself by saying “I am he”, even “a detachment of soldiers with police from the chief priests” are caused to “fall to the ground” at his mere words (Jn 18:5-6). Jesus is self-confident and unbowed in his interrogations and there is no “sweating blood” in the Garden prior to his arrest as elsewhere. Jesus knows what kind of death he will die (Jn 18:32). Jesus testifies to “his kingdom” even before Pontius Pilate, the representative of Rome, himself (Jn 18:36). Here the mocking of Jesus as a king with a crown of thorns and royal, purple robe is tragically comic yet also, for readers, at least, biting accuracy for Jesus has, indeed, testified to his genuine kingship. We must also note the charge put on the cross by Pilate, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”. “What is truth?” Pilate had asked. And here it is as far as John is concerned at the crucifixion. Finally, it is in John 19:30 in which Jesus utters “Tetelestai” - “It is finished!” - from the cross which seems, in the context of all we have said here, as a stage direction uttered by the director of events. Jesus decides when he will die and Jesus pronounces the acts of this particular narrative complete. It is not that events have caught Jesus up in a terrible and grisly end but, rather, that events have been dictated by the all-knowing Son of God and Divine Reason of the Universe all along.

That could have been the end... but, of course, it wasn't. Not for John and not for his Jesus who is bright shining as the Son, the Light of the World (Jn 8:12). There is still the resurrection to deal with and, this time, not a simple reanimation as in the case of Lazarus, a man brought back to life but who would die a natural death all over again. Here, in the resurrection of Jesus, we are talking about that "eternal life" of which Jesus has spoken throughout the gospel, largely in place of the "kingdom of God" about which the synoptics would rather speak instead. This "eternal life", as I wrote in my first ever biblical studies essay as a "wet behind the ears" student at university many years ago, is not an *amount* of life, but a *kind* of life. In its revelation through the resurrection Mary Magdalene has a starring role. It is she who first testifies to the empty tomb, running to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Moreover, it is Mary who will not leave the tomb after they have arrived, looked, and left again for their homes. Here she is the first to meet the risen Jesus and acknowledge him as risen Lord. Subsequently, of course, she is then the first to properly testify to his resurrection, the result of an instruction from the risen Jesus. This is a theme, that of testifying to his resurrection, which carries on when he appears to the gathered disciples behind locked doors and when they are made apostles, ones sent to testify.

But then there is Thomas who, for some convenient reason, was not present when this occurred. Whilst all the other disciples were behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews" Thomas, apparently, had no such fear. Or perhaps it is that he was elsewhere behind other locked doors? But, in any case, another occasion occurs at which the new apostles make him their first opportunity to carry out their ministry of testimony, testifying to Jesus' resurrection. But he does not believe them! Instead, he makes physical and empirical evidence of the facts his line in the sand. A week later these, we might imagine

not unreasonable, demands are met when the risen Jesus directly approaches Thomas at a further gathering and invites him to probe the wounds. The result, of course, is a confession and a direct testimony from, according to John's gospel, one who had actually probed the wounds with his very own hands. But there is a sting in the tail: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"! For readers of John probing wounds with one's own hands was not a realistic possibility yet John provides a story of one he claims did and it issued in a testimony to Jesus' resurrected glory as Lord and God. Now he challenges readers to believe in this same resurrected Jesus to which he, and the events he narrates, testify and he puts the challenge to do this on the lips of the resurrected, glorified Jesus himself. We remember now the challenge Jesus uttered many times throughout John: if one will not believe that Jesus and the Father are one, at least believe on the basis of his signs for "these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).

And so I now turn to the writer of John as one who has written a document that is itself a testimony as much as it is a gospel. This writer is identified at the end of John 21 as the "Beloved Disciple" who has played a role throughout the narrative. He is said to be the one "testifying to these things" as well as to be the one who "has written them down" - the latter a formulation which, according to Richard Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, may not literally mean he is the one putting pen to paper but should not be taken to mean *less* than that he dictates what is to be written. Only this, thinks Bauckham, retains the linguistic sense of the Greek verb *graphein*, to write, which is used. John 21:24, then, is in Bauckham's estimation making the claim that the bulk of John is the testimony of an actual eyewitness and so is the only one of the four

intracanonial gospels to make the claim in its own text that it is the testimony of an eyewitness. Whether or not one actually believes this is the case, as Bauckham does, it seems reasonable to assume that it is certainly the claim made. As such, the writer himself is an example of one who believes and so testifies himself which, within the text of John, is exactly what those believing are supposed to do.

But what about *how* he does it? It must be observed that John does not come across to readers as do the synoptics or Q, which is within the synoptics, or even Thomas, which seems tangentially related to them in terms of content. Here in John, for example, the use of “kingdom” or “kingdom of God” is exceedingly rare where it is not in those other sources. In contrast, the imagined goal for John is “eternal life”. In many of those other sources Jesus tells parables regularly and heals regularly, or even habitually, but not so here where, instead, he discourses at length in ways we may find historically dubious in themselves aside from the question of comparing it to how Jesus speaks elsewhere. Then there are the “I am” sayings of John, things such as “the Gate” or “the Vine” or “the Light of the World” or “the Bread of Life” which are not attested to in the five other sources mentioned. In the first 11 chapters of John the book’s general setup is to describe a historically-sited incident but then to attach to it extended discourse from Jesus and sometimes with additional editorial comment or discourse as well. Chapters 13-17 of the book are also given over to extended discourse from Jesus such that it strains credibility to imagine that such things can be historical remembrance or recitation either in detail or possibly even at all.

Being charitable, one gets the impression of John the book as a theologically inflected remembrance that functions as a testimony rather than as a book which claims to

journalistically report. This does *not* rule out that some historical details may be preserved and much less does it suggest the book is made up whole and entire. As it claims to be testimony, the charitable course of action is to grant it such claims - *yet as distant remembrance rather than as forensic report*. John we may see as “historical fiction” or history as Quentin Tarantino might tell it. In that respect, I recall an anecdote I once heard about the Jesus Seminar of which the Dutch film director, Paul Verhoeven, of *Robocop* and *Total Recall* fame, was once a member. He had an idea to do a film about the historical Jesus and the Seminar were interested in this, imagining that their construal of Jesus might be given an outing in cinemas around the world. However, it seems that when Verhoeven came back to them the Jesus he wanted to film was almost entirely based on the Jesus of John’s gospel - at which the Seminar’s heart sunk since, in their report, *The Five Gospels*, John had been coloured by them nearly all black and regarded as non-historical. Verhoeven’s reason for his choice, it seems, was that in John Jesus is much more exciting and vivid. Having read this writer’s testimony to his remembrance of the man who was the enfleshed divine reason of the universe, would we not agree with Verhoeven?

And so it is to Jesus we finally turn in our appraisal of John here. Jesus has himself, all along, been the primary witness, the primary giver of testimony, throughout the book. His challenge has been to believe in him as the revelation of God, as a vision of the Father, as the one to which the Torah points, in himself, in his words and in his deeds. In this gospel all these things are as witnesses to the glory of God and the significance of Jesus himself. This testimony about Jesus given as the testimony Jesus gave to himself and so to the God he represents in the book is there “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in

his name." Its purpose, and Jesus' purpose, is, then, to testify and to act as testimony. Jesus, mouthing the words of his literary amanuensis, testifies to himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" and to all he says and does as authentic in an historical challenge to all hearing and seeing it to either take him seriously and believe or deny it and reject him. "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" says Jesus in Jn 10:32 before saying shortly after at Jn 10:38 "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" - and this is essentially the testimony of the book and of the Jesus presented: do you believe in the truth of who Jesus was and what he showed you in what he did... or do you not? Of course, should one be persuaded and decide to believe both Jesus and this gospel which presents him as the fiction of a remembered history then both expect you to testify yourself as a result. Testimony begets testimony everywhere you turn in John.

23. Epilogue: Constructing Jesus: A Retrospective

The conclusion to Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*³⁷⁶ is a quite remarkable piece of rhetoric well worth a read if one is even remotely interested in the character Jesus of Nazareth. Here, for example, we learn that "There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus." Schweitzer continues:

"The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb."

Schweitzer's conclusion, played on so much by William Hamilton in his own book about "post-historical" Jesuses (to which I referred in my second chapter), is that "The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma." Schweitzer's view is then that any Jesus who comes to us as one we could be comfortable or familiar with is not a historical character at all – for that very fact would deny the obvious reality of history that we are not all just versions of the same thing. In short, Schweitzer's view is that, if we would come close to Jesus (for whatever reasons we have in doing so) then making up a historical character and proclaiming "That's the guy! That's how he really was!" is not the way to go about it. So, instead, he says:

"Our relationship to Jesus is ultimately of a mystical kind. No personality of the past can be transported alive into the present by means of historical observation or by discursive thought about his authoritative significance. We can achieve a relation to such a

³⁷⁶ I use the SCM Press "First Complete Edition" from 2000 which is based on the German edition of the original from 1913.

personality only when we become united with him in the knowledge of a shared aspiration, when we feel that our will is clarified, enriched and enlivened by his will and when we rediscover ourselves through him."

I often ask myself the question "What, then, is 'the historical Jesus'?" This book has contained speculations on how to answer that but I hope that one thing it has said is that "the historical Jesus" IS A FICTION – and that HOWEVER you conceive of him. But this book has imagined to be a "Posthistorical Jesus" reader. So what is "the posthistorical Jesus"? I think its the Jesus that last quotation of Schweitzer hints at – the Jesus we have a "mystical" relationship to, one we meet in our acknowledged fictions created by willful imaginations. None of us should pretend that the personalities created by such means were that guy from the past – even if that's where we site him. But we are always free, subject to discursive constraints provided by our peers, to imagine that we are telling truth about him, about that person who did exist in the past and about whom all honest historians admit we know almost nothing. (In addition, such historians would also admit we know almost nothing about the early Christian communities or even first century Galilee either. Historically, our evidence for pretty much anything to do with Jesus is slim to none.) The Posthistorical Jesus is then the Jesus who means something to us – it is "the meaning Jesus" and "the Jesus that means", the Jesus we interpret as meaningful fiction. This, to be sure, can be more or less historical, a matter of rhetoric and its entanglement in historical agendas which impress our peers by their convincingness in historical terms. Or not. But it is always, as a bare minimum, about meaning and meaningfulness. This doesn't even mean we have to think a historical Jesus existed. I assure you the few zealots making the argument that Jesus *never* existed are just as concerned about what that means as the most concerned conservative Evangelical scholar holding a dogmatic line about the historical verisimilitude of the four, and only the four, canonical gospels. Meaning is king FOR EVERYONE. For everyone.

But, all that said, you might be wondering if something isn't missing, so far, from the text of this book. And, you're right, it is. For what do I think about Jesus (and so, inevitably, the gospels)? I haven't really said, one or two hints or markers aside which I couldn't cut out of the chapters already included. The fact is, however, that in the seven books I originally wrote about Jesus and the gospels, from which the chapters of this book have been taken, all through those books was an ongoing narrative, part gospel criticism arguing for the relative historicity of this or that and part construction of a Jesus fiction of my own, which attempted to fill in these details. Up until now, I have kept that narrative back in this book. But now it is time to unleash it. I think this makes sense because you need to read what came before in order to contextualise what I will have to say about Jesus and the gospels directly now. Hopefully, what I say about Jesus and the gospels makes sense in the light of the thinking, which I have exemplified at length above, that produces it. My Jesus, like all others, is a fiction based on historical imagination. In and through it I imagine to tell truth about what I imagine him to have been about and about things that matter to me and seem, in my imaginings of him, to matter to him too. There is, thus, an imagined meeting of minds and values here which makes Jesus of Nazareth, Yeshua bar Yusuf, of interest to me in the first place. That is, in fact, the only reason that all this intellectual industry has taken place. Hearing about this character, I looked into him, saw something of meaning TO ME and pulled the thread to see where it would go. If I had never been interested in Jesus, or what I found had never interested me, then none of the work that produced this book (over years!) would ever have happened. As I said before, this is a meaning game.

An advantage of the way I have gone about this, and as I write about Jesus and the gospels in stages, adding a new bit each time I write a book, is that one can see the progression of my thought as I did more research, thought about it, and wrote something new. I intend to honour that process in the excerpts I will use in this chapter.

We will see where I start from and where I get to. Perhaps this will also be of some use to readers besides the content of those views alone. For the fact is my views have not stayed static and progressed from a fairly naive and uneducated starting point to one dependent on scholarly research. I imagine most laypeople, or those sitting in pews, would have not the slightest clue what “Q” or “Thomas” have to do with anything but, as will be seen, I find them rather important for how I come to see Jesus. Readers may divine from that comment that my Jesus fiction is not to be an orthodox one – and they would be right. But I am very sceptical of the notion that history and orthodoxy perfectly coincide. It all seems rather too neat and fictional. So I let my imagination go where it will, always cognisant of the desire to say something that can find historically justifying reasons or, at a minimum, possibilities. We should remember, however, that NONE of these historical Jesus figures existed. NONE are “the real guy”. So in recounting the history of where I have come from and where I have got to with Jesus and the gospels now please remember that the real truth to be found here is what I think they mean, the content and detail of my interpretations. It is the meaning that will survive even the non-existence for any Jesus presented. For it is the meaning this discourse is really about.

In the beginning was my incomplete PhD thesis, *The Posthistorical Jesus*. In it, in the fourth chapter of part one of three parts, I laid out my largely unreflective picture of the historical character, Yeshua, in a chapter entitled “Yeshua of Nazareth: Enactor of the Kingdom of God”. That title already gives pointers to a historical direction my imagination tended towards. It talks of Yeshua (which I assume to be his true Aramaic name) and not “Jesus” – which is Greek. (Why would Galilean Jews give their son a Greek name?) It also references “the kingdom of god” – taken to be a very Jewish theme of reference. My Jesus is a Jew and I insist on that regardless of what you think of what follows. In this chapter I start talking about gospel sources and relationships and how we begin to make historical (i.e. interpretive, fictional, imaginative) judgments about Jesus

at all but what I want to excerpt first of all is the image of Jesus, produced before any of the research across multiple books that would come, was done. It reads as follows:

"A Preliminary View of the Historical Jesus and Christian Origins

Any historical attempt to get to grips with the historical Jesus and Christian origins must necessarily focus on both of these things. Put simply, one cannot have a Jesus that does not also explain the earliest Christians and what they thought and said about him. A Jesus that did not do this would be a perfect example of an *ahistorical* Jesus. So the theories that you have about this must account for the whole phenomenon and not just a part. As I see this, there are three phases of activity to account for. First, we have the rise of Jesus, the things he says and does and the response (and people) this inspires. I see Jesus as a preacher, teacher and enactor of the Kingdom of God and this does indeed inspire some people to follow him and draws people to similar beliefs and hopes. But then we have the second phase which is the fact that Jesus is killed or gets himself killed. The crucifixion is a pivot and the central event in this set of three phases I'm discussing here. It is how we get from Jesus the enactor of the Kingdom of God to early Christianity. And then, thirdly, we have the first Christians themselves and the things they said, did, thought, and believed. We need to be able to explain these things in the light of what we, and they, believe about Jesus. Below is a concise expression of how I see these phases in outline.

I think that Jesus was a man who became energized by the notion of the Kingdom of God as a present reality that needed no mediation by priests or Temple, that was powerfully present and immediately available now to all who would believe this way and act accordingly. He preached this Kingdom, taught about it, modelled it and enacted it

with symbolic actions and language. He thought that this Kingdom meant both individuals changing their ways and beliefs and that it meant both a new kind of society and a new communal approach to religion. Jesus was preaching and teaching open access to God, God's transcendent immanence in, over and above all things, and that this should make a real difference to people's lives and their experience of life. So I think that he could talk of it as world-ending or as a new time because he saw it as something new and different yet, of course, still related to the story of the Jewish God which was the frame of reference he and his hearers were working with. However, I don't thereby think we have to make a choice between him being a wise and prudent sage or an eschatological prophet who speaks of end times. He can be both and that's fine. I think he was. I do not think that Jesus in any sense talked about this Kingdom as being based on himself. It was God's Kingdom and Jesus did not think of himself as God or as in any special relationship to God that anyone else within God's kingdom could not be in too. Jesus may have initially been energized to speak and act due to the activities of John the Baptist but this is not something we have to believe to explain his later activity. If there was any contact at all it was only a step on the road for Jesus, even if one which inspired him, for example by taking John's baptism, to his own action due to belief in John's God, one who is alive and acts powerfully. We need to remember that Jesus was a first century Palestinian Jew and so our beliefs about him must fit into this context too. But, of course, we do not necessarily have to believe that Jesus was right. We merely have to explain his actions in a plausible context. I think this brief summary does that.

This activity, perhaps due to its message or to its relative popularity or both, brings Jesus into conflict with authorities of at least two kinds. The first kind is with the Jewish religious authorities which his message basically bypasses and annuls. The second is the

Roman authorities which are legal and judicial. Such people would not be enamoured of those they see as troublemakers. Jesus is killed by crucifixion. I do not see this as anything Jesus expected, desired or hoped for. Much less was he trying to get himself killed as part of his own beliefs or as some part of God's plan. So I do not see this as fulfilling any pre-determined purpose. I do not see any of the so-called "Passion Narratives" as being remotely reliable historical records of how this came to be since they are clearly theological constructs trying to make sense of the event rather than historical records recording the events as they happened. We may speculate that Jesus, and perhaps intuitive others, could see that Jesus' activities might lead to conflict with the focus that they had but they do not seem to have stopped him or any others involved carrying on anyway. But Jesus did get killed, most likely due to his activities, and this gave all of those people who had been inspired by Jesus themselves a problem. They now had to make sense of all they had seen and heard from Jesus without Jesus actually being there physically anymore. Jesus was killed and stayed dead. This was exactly the problem - whilst not being exactly how they came to see it.

It is now that we come to the invention (perhaps a less harsh word is "imagination") of Christians because, during the activities of Jesus, there had been no Christians but just Jews who believed a particular interpretation of the Jewish faith, one put forward by Jesus. It is my suggestion that after the death of Jesus these people came to believe in God's Kingdom in a new way, one inspired by what Jesus had said and done but now based profoundly in a belief that what Jesus had been doing specifically embodied the truth and that Jesus himself was pivotal to this. Jesus was seen in a new light. They saw his death symbolically as a victory and a beginning rather than as a defeat and an end and him, in a way analogous to the Jewish prophet Elijah, who in legend had never died, as still alive. They conceived that God's Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus who was now

conceived as being in a special relationship to God himself, was active within their growing communities. Jesus was alive! So they moved on, due to Jesus' death, from the message that Jesus himself had been giving, that of present access to God's Kingdom, to a new message of God's Kingdom as available to all thanks to, because of and through Jesus himself. Jesus now became the focus and the proof of the things they now believed and Jesus' own significance was greatly heightened and made pivotal in the new founding story of this new faith. In essence, they invent Christianity which is built upon the original ideas Jesus had had about the Jewish faith but which goes far beyond them, particularly as they apply to Jesus himself. They refused to believe that what Jesus had taught both performatively and in words was dead but, instead, believed that the power of the God Jesus had spoken about was such that it could not be defeated and that even death itself should not be feared. Jesus himself was the proof of everything they now came to believe and they updated the message of Jesus into the new context they now found themselves in, one in which Jesus himself needed to be expounded upon and explained as the cornerstone of the faith."

Now the remarkable thing about this interpretation, from my perspective, is how I will take and run with its basic outline through the investigations I later take part in. Most interesting to me, is that there is no mention of "Jewish Cynic Jesus" here. And why would there be? This is almost entirely a phenomenon found amongst some few academics of the subject. But what I want readers to note is how, when I get to that thesis, it isn't formally contradicting this one I started out with here. Rather, it is making use of and expanding upon it. So what I am saying here, and continue to say as my ideas develop, is that I do think Jesus was a person possessed of (Jewish) values, values which he acted upon believing them to be relevant to Jewish faith and practice. I do believe that, in some way, these led to his death. And I do believe Christians, or what would become Christians, made more out of this, in their own, new, different, post-Jesus

situation, than Jesus would have done when he was there. Indeed, I expect this to be the case. Situations do not stay the same and new situations require new, better-suited, forms of understanding. When this happens it is nothing to do with betrayal or diversion or deviation. It is simply doing what is necessary in one's new situation – and I have no doubt Christians did so thinking they remained in continuity with the Jesus they remembered and interpreted by doing so. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. From this basic starting point, where do I go to next from here?

In my second book, *The Gospel of No One*, I began getting involved in talking about the Q Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas. In compiling this reader I have wondered why. Why turn to these things rather than the New Testament? I think its because of some thought such as "Where you start is where you will finish." Or, put this another way, if you start with the New Testament then all you will get is the imagined New Testament story. And everyone knows and has opinions on that already. But it is more than this. All through the chapters of this book one strand of thought is that which honours the originating idea of Reimarus, Schweitzer's starting point in looking for the Jesus of history, that that very same Jesus of history is, and must be, different to the Jesus of the New Testament gospels. This originating idea is then a suspicious idea, an idea that is suspicious of the New Testament gospels, an idea that says, "Hold on. Might I not come to my own conclusions? Must Jesus be scared of historical investigation?". As will now be seen, my starting point is also one of suspicion and one certainly prepared to doubt that the New Testament story is simply "the truth", a hermeneutically naive thought to begin with.

But, that being so, other stories must be investigated and other sources (and the possible communities that could have created them) imagined. In this, I was guided by the work of John Dominic Crossan in *The Historical Jesus* and *The Birth of Christianity*, Stephen Patterson in *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* and others (not least John

Kloppenborg in his many books on Q) who wanted not to think in terms of finished stories such as the synoptics or John, books which give theological visions of orthodox Christs, but in terms of what can only really be called something like “historical core tradition”. Now whether you think this can be found or not, it is clearly one impulse, and one research program, historical Jesus scholars have had in the past. What I did in one strand of *The Gospel of No One*, then, is attempt to imagine my own “core Jesus tradition” and interpret what I thought it meant to see which direction, in terms of historical imagination, it pushed me. This led me to a consideration of Mark, Q and Thomas (on a principle of multiple attestation) thought of together in terms of what they had in common and what this said about Jesus. (I suppose the intellectual idea here, which is a faulty idea, of course, is that all interpretations of Jesus must go back to a Jesus figure in the end and so to ask if this Jesus can be found by comparing different interpretations of him.) Doing this, as you will see in the excerpt below, led me to the “Cynic Jesus” thesis:

“Jesus in Q, Thomas and Mark

If we read the reconstructions of the gospels Q, Thomas and Mark (for in no case do we have an autograph of any of them), it would be uncontroversial to suggest that we would glean certain ideas about Jesus and his followers from doing so. Now this particular interlude has been titled “Jesus *in* Q, Thomas and Mark” by me and that, perhaps, is slightly misleading. For if I read these documents I ask myself, and about Crossan’s methodology which has been borrowed for this process as well, what can they tell me about Jesus and his followers, what can they reveal about the people behind the text? That, indeed, is the purpose of Crossan’s methodology, to tell us more about the historical contexts and *Sitz im Leben* of the historical characters they contain. When it comes to books, however, this intention may not be so simply replicated. This is because

every writer of a book, or community of those from whom books are produced, has their own ideas about those they write about. Writing is a creative process which involves the views and needs of those doing the writing. Indeed, this is one of the things methodology in historical study is meant to help in filtering out or otherwise identifying.

So we can suppose that if we read Q or Thomas or Mark alone we would come away with different ideas about Jesus. I think that, if we do that, then that is exactly what happens. But what, then, about this Jesus who, if he is historical, must necessarily lie behind them all? Is any history preserved through the narrative overlays or the interpretive matrices that texts set up? I believe it is and I think that the very first item in Crossan's inventory is a huge clue towards it.

1+ Mission and Message

<p>Q 10:1, 4-11</p> <p>1 After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. 4 Carry no purse, no knapsack, nor sandals, nor stick, and greet no one on the Road. 5 Into whatever house you enter, first, say: Peace to this house,! 6 And if a son of peace be there, let your peace come upon him; but if not, let your peace return upon you. 7 And at that house, remain, «eating</p>	<p>GTh 14:2</p> <p>When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside, when people take you in, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them.</p>	<p>Mk 6:7-13</p> <p>7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust</p>
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and drinking whatever they provide», for the worker is worthy of one's reward. Do not move around from house to house., 8 And whatever town you enter and they take you in, «eat what is set before you». 9 And cure the sick there, and say to them: The kingdom of God has reached unto you. 10 But into whatever town you enter and they do not take you in, on going out from that town, 11 shake off the dust from your feet.		that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.
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Crossan gives this complex a + sign, indicating he regards it as historical, and I agree with him. That being so, and Crossan's inventory being of value, we have here a triple independent attestation to... what? I ask you to imagine the scene you have in your head when you imagine Jesus in Galilee carrying out his mission. What is Jesus doing, where is he living, how is he living, to do this? What situation is this complex attesting to? My historical imagination tells me that it is attesting to *itinerancy* and to the fact that Jesus became itinerant for the sake of the kingdom of God. My thesis does not simply rest on this one complex which, methodologically speaking, would be poor history indeed. Neither, in recent context of historical Jesus study, am I alone in voicing such a proposal. Indeed, the German scholar Gerd Theissen, who demonstrates a socio-historical interest in his New Testament study, was talking in the early 1970s about “wandering radicals”.³⁷⁷

In more recent times scholars such as John Dominic Crossan, already mentioned, and

³⁷⁷ See Gerd Theissen, “Wandering Radicals: Light Shed By The Sociology of Literature On The Early Transmission of Jesus' Sayings,” in *Social Reality and the Early Christians* (ET; T+T Clark, 1993), pp.60-93, from a German original from 1973. Cf. Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (ET; Fortress, 1978) from a German original of 1977.

Burton Mack, who I will discuss later, and others have spoken to Jesus' itinerancy. Besides complexes like Mission and Message, which I regard as direct witnesses to this thesis, there are others which I think make sense if this context is established. One of these is another complex triply attested in Crossan's inventory by Q, Thomas and Mark.

44+ Carrying One's Cross

Q 14:27	Mk 8:34	GTh 55:2b
The one who does not take one's cross and follow after me cannot be my disciple.	He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.	Jesus said, "Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple, and whoever does not hate brothers and sisters, <i>and carry the cross as I do</i> , will not be worthy of me."

It is my suggestion that when Jesus talks about "following" in the Jesus traditions he is *not* talking about some spiritual decision, such as it is often viewed by modern interpreters today. No, when Jesus talks about following in these traditions he is talking about *actual following*, by which I mean to say leaving everything behind and physically taking off with Jesus and his group. So, on this understanding, those who follow Jesus are *literally* those who are following, people who have left home, family, work, who have voluntarily become poor itinerants. This is "denying yourself" as Mark puts it. This is "hating father and mother" or "brothers and sisters" as Thomas has it. This, I think, makes a lot more sociological sense of the history of Jesus and his movement and its historical consequences. Jesus was calling people to give up their lives for the kingdom not in some mystical, spiritual sense but quite literally and physically with all the consequences of loss of work and family that this itinerant lifestyle entailed. In this

context his attitude towards rich and poor, for example, comes more sharply into focus as do the many agrarian metaphors ascribed to him. In such a context consider the following triply attested saying:

31+ First and Last

Q 13:30	Mk 10:31	GTh 4:2
The last will be first and the first last.	But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.	For many of the first will be last, and will become a single one.

Here Q preserves a more absolute form which Mark and Thomas mitigate with “many”. Thomas also adds its own theological spin at the end. But the core of the saying is the notion of the “last”, which I want to interpret as Jesus’ homeless band of wandering itinerants in the countryside, being the most esteemed. Jesus is saying that people who give up everything for the kingdom of God will find their status transformed in the eschatological future.

But what does this kind of socio-historical context imply for the rest of the message of Jesus? Let us look at two more of the 11 total triply attested complexes from Q, Thomas and Mark.

4+ Ask Seek Knock

Q 11:9-10	Mk 11:24	GTh 2, 92:1, 94
9 I tell you, ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and it will be opened to	So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be	Jesus said, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find... Jesus said, "Seek and you

you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who searches finds, and to the one who knocks will it be opened.	yours.	will find." ... Jesus [said], "One who seeks will find, and for [one who knocks] it will be opened."
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8+ When and Where

Q 17:20-21, 23 «But on being asked when the kingdom of God is coming, he answered them and said: The kingdom of God is not coming visibly», 21 , «Nor will one say:» Look, here! or: «There! For, look, the kingdom of God is within you!»... 23 If they say to you: Look, he is in the wilderness, do not go out; look, he is indoors, do not follow.	Mk 13:21-23 21 And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. 22 False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. 23 But be alert; I have already told you everything.	GTh 51, 113 51 His disciples said to him, "When will the rest for the dead take place, and when will the new world come?" He said to them, "What you are looking forward to has come, but you don't know it." 113 His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it."
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I want you to imagine that the interpretive context I am suggesting is in the ballpark of being accurate. Jesus and his movement are a bunch of wandering itinerants who preach the kingdom of God. We can imagine him, and them, interacting with the people of the country as they pass through towns and villages. What kind of mentality would be required to live like this? It seems to me that such a lifestyle would require both a radical and total reliance on God and this, I argue, is what Jesus in fact teaches. This is the

context of Ask Seek Knock, that one should go straight to God for one's needs, and of When and Where, which we can see is being interpreted by each document in slightly differing ways depending on their overarching context. But note that in Q the kingdom of God is "within you" and in Thomas the kingdom is already arrived but unseen. Mark, of course, has a greater narrative purpose to service and the theological purpose of demonstrating that Jesus is the son of God. He is content for Jesus to say that he has told them all they need to know. Yet in each case we see behind this complex a reliance on God as provider in the existential context of people literally living on God's bounty and favour. Jesus teaches that they should directly rely upon him for he is, indeed, powerfully active in the world. This, in fact, is the context of a further triply attested saying. The actuality of God's presence is not to be denied:

23+ All Sins Forgiven

Q 12:10	Mk 3:28-30	GTh 44
And whoever says a word against the son of humanity, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks, against the holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.	28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."	Jesus said, "Whoever blasphemes against the Father will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes against the son will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, either on earth or in heaven."

I argued earlier for the parabolic nature of the gospels and suggested, following the lead of John Dominic Crossan, that this was based on Jesus' own parabolic nature. In another

triply attested saying I believe we see Jesus parabolically using the social situation of his followers versus others to great effect:

40+ Have and Receive

Q 19: (25-)26	Mk 4:25	GTh 41
26 For, to everyone who has will be given; but from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.	For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."	Jesus said, "Whoever has something in hand will be given more, and whoever has nothing will be deprived of even the little they have."

Who are the followers of Jesus in the imagined scenario that I am putting forward? They are the ones who have nothing. They must find food as they can or rely on the gifts of others or nature's bounty. They have no possessions or homes. Then Jesus says this. If you have nothing even that will be taken away. What? How should we interpret this? It surely cannot be talking about possessions for surely the wisdom here is that of redistribution, at least in conventional wisdom. Those who have something should be sharing with those who don't. What if we make the subject faith? Those who have faith will get more but those with none will lose even what little they have have? The saying eludes easy understanding yet having and not having is the point of parabolic comparison which is suggestive of a social situation.

I want to carry on developing this itinerancy theme and to do that I want to look briefly at Q, Thomas and Mark themselves as gospels in order to see if we can extract more of the theme. Being able to do so, I want to pull all this together into a picture of Jesus that

has become one strand of contemporary historical Jesus research in the last 25-30 years especially. I will start by looking at Q.

First we can consider Q 9:57-60:

"And someone said to him: I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus said to him: Foxes have holes, and birds of the sky have nests; but the son of humanity does not have anywhere to lay his head. But another said him: Master, permit me first to go bury my father. But he said to him: Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Here we have another example of following, actual, physical, "leave everything behind and follow" following. Someone claims they will follow Jesus wherever the journey takes them. Jesus replies by saying, in effect, that to follow him is to be homeless. Another asks to be allowed to bury his father. Jesus gives no quarter in reply. The itinerants' kingdom tour is more important and it is always seemingly moving on and not putting down roots. Shortly after this in the order of Q comes Mission and Message, to which I referred at the start of this essay, in which Jesus tells his followers how they are to go out into the countryside as they travel from place to place and how they should survive. We can imagine from this that Jesus did not act alone nor was he personally present on every "mission". Q 10:16 states "Whoever takes you in, takes me in; and whoever takes me in takes in the one who sent me" which clearly implies this. But what will this itinerancy cost? According to Q 17:33 it seems to be everything: "The one who finds one's life will lose it, and the one who loses one's life for my sake will find it." Again, "losing" your life should be interpreted quite literally and materially.

Another tightly compacted set of material in Q underscores all this. The section is Q 12:22b-31 in which Jesus discusses life, eating, the body, clothes, and asks his hearers to consider the birds and the lilies of the field. Naturally, it is worth quoting in full:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you are to eat, nor about your body, with what you are to clothe yourself. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet God feeds them. Are you not better than the birds? And who of you by being anxious is able to add to one's stature a .. cubit? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe the lilies, how they grow? They do not work nor do they spin. Yet I tell you: Not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these. But if in the field the grass, there today and tomorrow thrown into the oven, God clothes thus, will he not much more clothe you, persons of petty faith? So do not be anxious, saying: What are we to eat? Or What are we to drink? Or What are we to wear? For all these the Gentiles seek; for your Father knows that you need them all. But seek his kingdom and all these shall be granted to you."

I suggest that this is best understood, sociologically and historically, as addressed to an itinerant, homeless band of Jesus' followers. Naturally, these people who have given up homes and families are anxious about what will happen next. Jesus' message is quite simple though: seek God's kingdom first. This is backed up, in addition, by some of the Beatitudes also found in Q. Q 6:20-21a reads: "And raising his eyes to his disciples he said: Blessed are you poor, for God's reign is for you. Blessed are you who hunger, for you will eat your fill." "Disciples," we should recall, means simply "followers" and the "poor" and "hungry" are quite literally so for there is a cost to discipleship. What's more, "The one who does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple; and the one who

does not hate son and daughter cannot be my disciple.” This “hate”, as suggested above, is a matter of deliberate separation for the kingdom, a thing as shocking then as it might be now.

When we move to look at Thomas we see some familiar themes and a few other sayings to support them. Jesus’ message against anxieties, which is complex 82 in Crossan’s inventory (and regarded as historical by him), is there (GTh 36) in more primitive form as is the Beatitude “blessed are the poor” (GTh 54). Also present, at GTh 86, is Jesus’ saying “Foxes have holes” which is doubly attested with Q and is Crossan’s complex 101 Foxes Have Holes (again positively regarded). But there are a few other clues. GTh 27a states “If you do not fast from the world, you will not find the (Father’s) kingdom” and GTh 31 is “Jesus said, “No prophet is welcome on his home turf; doctors don’t cure those who know them.” The first of these sayings seems quite straightforward in my developing context, the latter implies that Jesus’ own focus on the kingdom required that he wander from his home town. GTh 78 sees a reworked version of a saying known within the synoptics as referring to John the Baptizer: “Jesus said, “Why have you come out to the countryside? To see a reed shaken by the wind? And to see a person dressed in soft clothes, [like your] rulers and your powerful ones? They are dressed in soft clothes, and they cannot understand truth.” Here, however, the reference to John has been stripped (or, alternatively, it was added elsewhere by others) and it functions to demonstrate that people had to go out into the countryside to seek Jesus where, to make narrative sense of the saying, he has to be in this case. GTh 55 and 101 are sayings, once more, about hating fathers and mothers, etc., and there are some sayings in Thomas which are against wealth or riches. The final line of GTh 64 reads: “Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father” whilst GTh 95 reads: “If you have money, don’t lend it at

interest. Rather, give [it] to someone from whom you won't get it back," the logical conclusion of which would be poverty, a giving without counting the cost. Those who cling to wealth, we may suggest, always seem to be regarded as those who have rejected the seeming poverty of the kingdom. Jesus never in any gospel says "Blessed are the rich" and from his social position it would seem to make absolute sense that he doesn't. There is one more saying from Thomas that I want to note and its GTh 42 which simply states "Be passersby." Exactly.

When reading Mark we need to be somewhat more careful for it is a narrative gospel which imposes a storied time upon its context in a way that sayings collections like Q and Thomas simply do not. But we cannot, read should not, imagine that Mark either intends or knows an exact order of events. This narrative framework is fictional and redactional and not representative of, or with knowledge of, the timing or sequencing of actual events. Yet, already, in Mark's summation of Jesus' activity in his first chapter, we can see that the idea of Jesus on the move is embedded in the tradition: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" (Mk 1:14-15). Jesus, who in Mark's narrative had been with John the Baptizer and then tempted "in the wilderness", came "to Galilee" in general which indicates to this reader, at least, that he was not identified with any one place but just an area in general, an area he perhaps wandered around. In Mark Jesus also calls people to "follow" him, both named disciples and people in general, which I have interpreted previously as a literal requirement. Mark, indeed, has several redactional and narrative elements which show Jesus to be going from place to place. He is said to visit the area of the Decapolis, south east of Galilee, at least twice as well as sailing back and forth across the Sea of

Galilee multiple times. He also visits places like Caesarea Philippi in the far north, Tyre in the west or even Judea in the south. Mark also records Jesus as disappearing into the mountains to be alone so that people search for him or as going among villages generally, teaching. Mark 1:45 reports that Jesus “stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.” Mark 6:6b says, “Then he went about among the villages teaching.”

An interesting saying in this respect is Mk 10:28-30: “Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” Peter and his brother Andrew have been called to follow Jesus (literally follow) already in Mark 1. Now here we find Peter pointing out that they (which, historically, means at least Jesus’ closest followers) “have left everything and followed you”. Jesus tries to reassure them that rewards are coming although, clearly, this section is redacted and written with one eye to the situation at the time at which Mark writes with its talk of persecutions and the age to come. But it should also not be lost on us that this exchange is placed shortly after words from Jesus about the rich and the poor once more. In one example, in which Jesus is confronted by a pious but rich man his answer is revealing: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Mk 10:21-22). Jesus then, narratively, faces his disciples directly: “Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will

be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk 10:23). From this I can only take away that there is a strong historical remembrance of Jesus as one who sharply distinguished rich and poor and who saw riches, and the attachment they necessitated, as a hindrance to the kingdom. You cannot literally follow if you are concerned for what you have. And following, taking the kingdom across the country, was what Jesus, and those who were with him, did.

We see an example of this wandering across country in the "lord of the sabbath" incident in Mark 2: "One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath"" (Mark 2:23-28). This is very reminiscent of a Jesus who "went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons" as Mark 1:39 records and we get a very strong image of a wandering Jesus from this. However, as I have already warned, we should be foolish if we believed these redactional asides alone as historical evidence where that is not filled out and confirmed with historical incidents which betray a similar itinerant mentality and reality. It is hoped that, by this point, a basic case has at least been made. There are, however, a couple of things in Mark which may give us pause. In Mark 2 Jesus is said to eat "with tax collectors and sinners" at Levi's house. He is also, in a few places (cf. 2:1, 3:19b, 9:33) said to be in a house or even at home. Could these

things contradict the itinerant thesis? In my view this is not the case. Jesus is nowhere saying that people cannot stay in the homes of others. His mission instructions at Mark 6:10 make plain that he permits missionaries to stay with others. It seems plain from the gospel testimony that both he and his followers do this yet without settling down. Mark is a gospel in which following is a theme in any case. Even blind Bartimaeus follows Jesus upon regaining his sight! (Mark 10:52b).

This, then, is my basic case for an itinerant Jesus, an itinerant Jesus attested jointly by Q, Thomas and Mark and individually in Q, Thomas and Mark. This is to say that I regard Jesus as an itinerant wanderer as being multiply and independently attested by these three gospels. I have no doubt that further study in the doubly attested material between these three gospels would provide more food for thought on this subject as well. But now I must turn to asking what it means. To do this I turn to the work of Gerald Downing, a British scholar who, over at least the last 30 years, has been working on the notion of Jesus as a Jewish Cynic. He has written a number of book length treatments of this theme but I refer here primarily to his essay "Jesus and Cynicism" in the *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, which is a standard modern reference work in the field of historical Jesus studies.³⁷⁸

That the "Cynic Jesus" thesis has not been well received in general by historical Jesus scholarship should be no surprise. This is a side effect of its sadly confessional bias. Historical Jesus and New Testament scholarship in general is held in the sway of a synoptic account of Jesus (where the narrative is taken as history) and also of a singular

³⁷⁸ F. Gerald Downing, "Jesus and Cynicism" in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols., eds, Tom Holmén and Stanley Porter, Brill, 2011), pp.1105-1136. See *Christ and the Cynics* (JSOT Press, 1988) and *Cynics and Christian Origins* (T&T Clark, 1992) by the same author for fuller argumentation for his formulation of the idea. For Cynicism itself standard works are *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* (eds., R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Caze, University of California Press, 1996), William Desmond, *Cynics* (Acumen, 2008) and Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Greenwood Press, 1996).

conception of Judaism that is all powerful. Jesus, in such scholarship, must be both as in the synoptics and totally (by which is meant exclusively) Jewish.³⁷⁹ So to conceive that he might be some version of a Hellenistic cultural critic or a member of some Greek school of thought runs contrary to both of these fixed lines of traditional scholarship. Therefore, it is noteworthy that Downing notes John Kloppenborg's observation that "the hypothesis of a Jewish-Cynic strand in Christian origins seems to be expected to meet much higher standards than the critics deploy in their own alternative reconstructions".³⁸⁰ The game is rigged, we should not be surprised to find.

Downing outlines the generality of proposals that have led some scholars to talk of a Cynic Jesus thusly:

*"Proposals have varied, but attention has generally been focused on apparent similarities in the itinerant life-styles, including dress, of Cynics and of Jesus and his followers, their espousal of poverty, their eschewing gainful employment and so their dependence on others, their reliance on models drawn from non-human 'nature,' acting in a determined opposition to codes of civic respectability; together with particular attention to comparisons of their styles of communication and individual recorded actions and utterances."*³⁸¹

Such proposals are frustrated, though, by unfortunate scholarly habits:

379 We saw in the previous chapter that Maurice Casey was a perfect example of this scholarly conservatism even where he does not share the confessional basis for it. Yet it has been noted that even John Dominic Crossan finds a basically synoptic Jesus and Crossan himself claims, despite the protests of people like Casey, that his Jesus is Jewish.

380 Downing, "Jesus and Cynicism", p.1108.

381 Ibid., p.1106.

*"There is in fact very little independent evidence of any sort for popular culture in early first-century CE Galilee. The only at all extensive documents we possess that even claim relevance are the four gospels... The relevance of these may be argued, but there is no independent evidence by which to verify (or falsify) the conclusions proposed, as is shown by the varied and often conflicting conclusions reached by those who do restrict themselves to the sources listed... There is simply a powerful conventional and often unreflective restriction to this choice of illustrative material."*³⁸²

Downing, noting that often critics of the Cynic Jesus thesis will sometimes recourse to "coincidence" as a defence, makes a reasonable proposal, however, when he suggests what historians of Jesus *should* be doing: "if we find that some gospel matter significantly resembles Cynic tradition, and the similarity is greater than with any known contemporary native Jewish traditions, then we are justified in considering an hypothesis to account for this as being other than 'pure coincidence.'"³⁸³ Downing is surely right about this. We cannot, as historians, rule things out because they don't fit the ideas some other things have put into our heads, ideas we have perhaps become comfortable with. We must, in fact, always be ready to reshape or recontextualise those very ideas. And, what's more, the things against which we measure the historical Jesus in this case are not exactly static and singular in any case.

This is not the case in early expressions of Christian belief ("Attempts to define an elaborate 'essence'" of the early Christian 'way' will meet these days with incredulity"³⁸⁴) or with Cynicism, a Greek phenomenon that spread across the entire Hellenistic world in ways which sometimes had very different forms of expression such that "To demand

382 Ibid., p.1109.

383 Ibid., p.1110.

384 Ibid.

that every item of all variants of Cynicism be matched in any Jewish Cynicism ascribed to Jesus is to ask for more to be included together there than is found together in any acknowledged Cynic source.”³⁸⁵ This is to say that, if we are historical, there is no cardboard cut out Christian belief, no cardboard cut out Cynic belief *or* practice and no cardboard cut out Jesus or Judaism. One thing we can say, though, and something with which I agree with Downing on quite strongly, is to say that if Jesus be a Jewish kind of Cynic then this does not dejudaize him or remove him from a Jewish context. Besides the wisdom that in first century Galilee all Judaism was Hellenistic in any case, we can say that:

*“if we do find in Jesus Cynic elements from the Greek tradition he remains no less a Jew than does Philo or Josephus or the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, or the writer of 4 Maccabees—or those responsible for the Mishnah, and the Talmuds, with the Greek influence discernible there.”*³⁸⁶

In short, *the argument is not that Jesus is a Cynic but that he is a Jewish kind of Cynic*, that Judaism and Cynicism can be found mixed in the beliefs and practices of one person. Many critics of the Cynic Jesus thesis seem to find this notion implicitly impossible for reasons illegitimately left unexplained.

Of course, one problem here is lack of information. I have already noted that Mark, as one example, is a fictional narrative set in fictional time in which the connecting links are narrative not history. As Downing parses this problem, “We do not know enough about Jesus to allow us to construct a clear account of the primitive church because we do not

385 Ibid., p.1111.

386 Ibid., p.1122.

know enough about the primitive church to allow us to construct a clear account of Jesus.”³⁸⁷ This particular issue will not soon leave us and yet this is no excuse for making rash historical decisions.

One set of such rash decisions is, as mentioned, on deciding what a “Jewish Cynic” might look like, something opponents of this thesis are often either shy of detailing or, to the contrary, over prescriptive in detailing. As Downing notes of a Jesus said to have been to the Decapolis, an area east of the Jordan which has historical Cynic links:

*“With so much variety and internal disagreement among designated Cynic sources, and so much evidence for eclecticism across named schools of thought, we are in no position to decide in advance what sets of Cynic practices and ideas could have been around in Gadara or in other towns of the Decapolis; nor that any Galilean encountering any such variant set must have felt bound to take it or leave it whole and entire.”*³⁸⁸

In short, we historians or reconstructors of the past do not get to decide what a Cynic Jesus *must* look like. This is especially the case when there were variant forms of Cynicism and Jesus, should he have taken them up at all, is bound to take up no one form instead of another. Is it not more the correct logic to presume, as Downing argues, that “A chosen public lifestyle (such as that ascribed to Jesus) most likely presupposes its own social intelligibility”?³⁸⁹ We can at least concede that Jesus’ chosen mode of activity, homeless wandering, brings with it its own questions. But does not Jesus answer these admirably in the evidence I have already brought forth from Q, Thomas and Mark? The

387 Ibid., p.1116.

388 Ibid., p.1115.

389 Ibid., p.1117.

question becomes, in this context, if that is demonstrative of a kind of Jewish Cynicism and such a question is surely not out of bounds.

So who were the Cynics?³⁹⁰ The Cynics of ancient Greece and Rome existed for perhaps 1000 years, 400 years before and 600 years after the turn of the Common Era. The most famous Cynic is without doubt Diogenes of Sinope, a Greek from what is now the Turkish coast of the Black Sea. Diogenes is remarkably well attested throughout Hellenistic Greek and Roman literature and was clearly a popular figure of the time, not least with those who would write about ethics. Many perhaps apocryphal stories have made it down even to our day about him and what he was like. He is said to have told the mighty Alexander the Great to move out of his sun, to have presented a plucked bird to Plato as an example of a man (thus refuting his definition of what a man was), to have shunned ordinary society by living in a barrel or large tub and to have done what we might regard as disgusting acts such as spitting in people's faces or performing bodily functions in public places. So what were Diogenes, called "the dog" for his way of living, and the Cynics who would claim allegiance to his way of life about? What was the ethic of their lives?

Put simply, it was naturalism, the belief that anything done according to nature could not be unethical. So why not masturbate in the street to relieve the sexual urge, as Diogenes is said to have done? Such urges are natural and normal and so not a cause for shame. They are also quite easily dealt with. Today if you masturbated openly in the street you would be treated with extreme suspicion as a person and certainly criminalised. But why? What ethical harm would have resulted from your action? To a Cynic this would make no sense for natural things cannot be unethical. To a Cynic, in fact,

³⁹⁰ I refer readers once more to the books listed above for a more detailed answer to this question.

the problem was civilisation itself with its arbitrary customs and civilised ways that had no basis in nature at all. Cynics were those who wanted to *uncivilise* people and destroy the destructive civilising ideal which, for them at least, was contrary to nature. Cynics wanted a life without artifice and they criticised civilised life as something entirely artificial, something with no basis in anything at all. At the heart of this is the question of what the human animal is and what makes someone human. There is a well known story about Diogenes going around a market place in the daytime with a lantern looking for “an honest man” as many modern versions have it today. But the actual Greek states that Diogenes was searching for “a human being”. So the Cynic notion of ethics is to follow that ethic which makes us human beings. And they did not think that the civilised, artificial customs of those who lived in cities were promoting this. They thought it was to make those who observed them less than human. A human being cannot be a slave to artificial customs in naturalist Cynic thinking. The Cynic problematic, accordingly, was that most people appear human but are not. It might even be argued that they saw civilisation as a kind of nihilism based in empty notions of right and wrong.

We moderns perhaps need to get under the skin of the Cynic mentality to have this make some sense to us since many of us are now many times more civilised, and so dehumanised in Cynic thinking, than those whom the Cynic historically addressed. Cynics were illegitimate or foreign, outsiders, either in fact or by declaration or both. One expression of this is their declaration of being cosmopolitan, citizens of the world, and thus of no nation or city state or nationalistic grouping which was to intentionally embrace the vulnerability this implies. The Cynic recognises themselves as only a human being and oblivious of the distinctions of others, part of a natural world. Birth, upbringing, race, family, gender, ethnicity are of no import. Cynics were marginal

meddlers, invalidating and defacing the civilised world. Not for them a life of attaining wealth or power or a higher standard of living. They willfully existed on a minimum, what nature provided, and their abode was whatever offered shelter. The Cynic does not even attain to the longest life possible. Today may be the first and last day of life and that is fine. Their stance in life makes them antisocial unless amongst fellow Cynics. Cynics also practiced shamelessness, as any naturalist must, shame being a thing upon which civil society is seen to run. Their naturalism could not allow shame for what animal, animals being those things that perfectly exemplify living according to nature, displays shame? But they called this shamelessness freedom for when the animal acts "shamelessly" it does so not to break apparent rules but because it can, because nature allows.

A number of Greek terms symbolise the Cynic ethic. *Autarkeia*, self-sufficiency, is certainly one. *Euteleia*, frugality, is another. *Parrhesia*, freedom of speech, is yet another. *Askēsis*, asceticism, is a fourth. Cynics were happy to live life according to *Tyche*, chance, luck or contingency, to be *atimia*, without civic rights, to accept the *ponoi*, the hardships of a natural life lived according to *physis*, nature, and opposed to *nomos*, custom or law. Their archetype was Heracles who had completed twelve labours and they conceived of their own natural lives as labours too. Their antitype was Prometheus who had stolen fire from the gods and so enabled human beings to begin civilising themselves. Fire is symbolic here for with it we can become many things that we cannot without it. No other animal uses fire. It sets us apart from the natural world. Cynics would wash in cold water if they washed at all and would eat raw food. If they were male (we do have record of at least one female Cynic, Hipparchia, who was married to the Cynic Crates) they would not shave and so they had long, unkempt beards and hair. They wore few clothes and no shoes, the *tribon* or cloak being their one notable item of clothing. For the Cynic

the simple life was the natural life and they accepted what hardships came along with this as part and parcel of what makes us human. They did not care for length of life for they valued its quality and authenticity over its amount. Ten years of naturalism trumps one hundred years of artificiality in the Cynic mind. Cynics were those who believed your form of life affected your being-in-the-world. They did not believe freedom was a matter of a physical situation for, as in a story told about Diogenes being made a slave, he still regarded himself as a king nevertheless. For Cynics a human being is born free, a child of the natural world rather than a citizen of a state.

Cynics acted with avowed ethical intent. They lived a life in pursuit of virtue and claimed to be demonstrating the virtuous life. To the civilised, however, they often appeared like dogs or savages, backwards and as Luddites rejecting human progress. The term "Cynic", which comes from the Greek for dog, was meant to be pejorative, an insult, but those so called actually saw in it a truthful and worthy designation. Cynics sought virtue and believed in reason. But they did not value the false and domesticated versions of these things they regarded as being found in civilisation. These things were more authentically found in nature and they observed it for instruction as when Diogenes, seeing a child scoop up water with cupped hands, threw away his cup. They had an ethic of simplicity such that:

"in his seemingly universal nay-saying, the Cynic avoids traditional clothes, jewellery and bodily adornments for his own 'uniform'; he restricts his diet; does not live in a house; derides bathing, sports, the Games; scoffs at festivals, sacrifice, prayer and religious life generally; does not marry, dodges work and steers clear of the courts, assembly, army and

other arenas of political participation. He even strives to bust out of old patterns of talking, and tosses up for himself a wild new language."³⁹¹

The Cynic, in short, was a countercultural, a person who did not run with the herd, who did not tinker at the edge of life but argued that humans were going in entirely the wrong direction and risked not living their full humanity at all. Accordingly, the Cynic had a different appreciation of time to those civilised who, necessarily, begin to write histories and build future plans. The Cynic, on the contrary, lived in the ever present. An important Cynic precursor, Antisthenes, claimed to satisfy his desires with "whatever is present", Diogenes was more concerned about the sun's warmth than building an empire. Other Cynics claim they can own only the patch of ground they stand on or even nothing at all.

One outworking of this belief about time and our place in it is that Cynics were not afraid to commit suicide when they believed their useful life was done. They did not, as more civilised notions up to today demonstrate more clearly, believe that one should strive to live as long as possible. So if today one should counter with all the supposed benefits that civilisation has brought us, not least medical, they would be met with a blank stare of irrelevance by a Cynic. Cynics were usually individualists without family or children. This seems to have been a practical thing and was certainly tendentious since no Cynics could really deny that the sexual urge or procreation were contrary to nature. However, they regarded themselves, as some classical texts show, as carers of humanity as a whole. Here, for example, is a section from the *Dissertations* of Epictetus:

³⁹¹ Desmond, *Cynics*, pp.77-78.

"'How then', asked the young man, 'will a Cynic preserve society?' In the name of God, man, who is the greater benefactor to mankind? Those who bring forth two or three ugly-snouted children to take their place, or those who watch over all mankind as best they can, observing what they do, how they spend their time, what they care for, and what they disregard contrary to their duty?"³⁹²

So Cynics were individuals who saw themselves with a communal duty to enable people to live a fully authentic humanity. But it was recognised that this was not easy and, indeed, its hardship was made a key part of the Cynic mentality. As William Desmond writes:

*"the Cynics simply enjoyed whatever was at hand, even if it were only lentils and sunshine. But to be able to enjoy the chance occurrences of the present is very difficult, and such a radical simplicity requires both physical and psychological discipline. Hence askēsis was central to the Cynic lifestyle, although theirs was a cheerful and hedonistic, not a world-denying, asceticism. That is, they paradoxically welcomed pain as a necessary condition of elemental pleasure. Askēsis made them true hedonists, to such an extent that they might even get pleasure in their self-chosen pains: 'the scorn of pleasure is the greatest pleasure'.... one can find a similar view adumbrated in Julian: the true Cynic must first practice askēsis to free himself from the desire for pleasures, but once he is able to 'trample' on them at will, then 'he may permit himself to dip into that sort of thing if it come his way.'"*³⁹³

³⁹² Diss. 3.22.77, quoted in *ibid.*, p.94.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp.101-102.

This is to say only that Cynics lived opportunistically, in the moment, as those who live by nature's rules must. An animal, for example, may naturally feed on what it can forage for or kill, if it eats meat. But should it come across a cooked meal left in the street what animal would turn its nose up and pass it by?

So this is a concise appreciation of the Cynic way. It is a naturalism which is claimed to be the way of virtue and of human authenticity. It is not recognised as the easy choice and, as we have seen, its pains are even taken as markers of its "elemental pleasure." What I find of importance here is the central notion that how you live affects and shapes you as a person which is true whether you accept the Cynics' beliefs or not. The Cynic was saying that how you live (which is the ethical question) affects who you are and who you become. So we can see that their ethical intent is clear, again, whether you believe they were going about it the right way or not. Cynics did not divorce theory from practice and they were holists in this respect, viewing thought about life and "doing life" as essentially all of a piece. You need not theorise about how to be virtuous. You lived it. You demonstrated it. You made radical choices and lived their consequences. This is greatly to their credit and demonstrates how highly they held the notion of an ethical life.

But our question here is not about the rights and wrongs, or worthiness or stupidity, of the Cynic way of life. It is, instead, if we can marry this attitude to that of a Jew from Galilee. It is my view that even if not all of this fits Jesus in detail it certainly seems to in general as some kind of context and definitely to the extent that there is a case to be investigated. Of course, we must immediately concede that Jesus is a pious Jew and one who in his own observance concedes the kingship of the Jewish god. But the thesis here

being defended is that Jesus is something like a *Jewish* Cynic and not simply a Cynic. So, in that case, to believe in the Jewish god is not to deny any Cynicism. It is to affirm that aspects of Judaism and Cynicism be found in his way of living and his activities. But what can we say about Jesus in this Cynic context? Downing notes the following:

*"Jesus in the tradition commends the blessedness of the poor, forbids the accumulation of wealth, and judges it incompatible with service to God, demanding dispossession (Luke/Q[?] 6:21–25; Luke/Q 12:22–31, 33–34; Luke/Q 16:13; Mark 10:17–26). So we find Jesus, with no clear precedent in his own culture, hitting on poverty as constitutive of the good life, of blessedness: an approach that for centuries in the Hellenistic world had been exhibited and commended and talked about and related in lively Cynic anecdotes that could be part of the school curriculum for anyone learning to write Greek."*³⁹⁴

Regarding the "lilies of the field" saying, Crossan's complex 82 Against Anxieties which I discussed above under its location at Q 12:22b-31, Downing has this to say: "So, if this is not reliant on Greco-Roman, and specifically Cynic tradition, we are asked to believe that Jesus, by coincidence, and quite independently, make[s] what is a frequent Cynic point, unprecedented otherwise in his native culture. And, as it happens, this complex sequence, though lacking Galilean Jewish cultural precedent is meaningful enough to have been remembered, recorded, repeated, in detail. Coincidences certainly do seem to be piling up."³⁹⁵ Indeed, Downing sees general Cynic influence in the synoptics as a whole: "the sheer quantity of parable, metaphor and simile [in the synoptic tradition] would strongly reinforce the impression that anyone repeating this material was some

³⁹⁴ Downing, "Jesus and Cynicism," p.1125.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., p.1127.

sort of Cynic."³⁹⁶ Here Downing suggests that how Jesus and his gang of followers might be observed in their time and place is *as Cynics*.

We may note that Downing had already made this point before in the essay in a discussion of the Cynic dress, something for which they were generally notable:

*"The evidence for a supposed uniformity in Cynic dress is in fact derived from a small number of caricatures derived from outsiders. If one looks at the Cynic sources themselves in detail (rather than at today's or yesterday's generalizations...) there was even more variety in Cynic get-up (and in the terminology for the various items of "equipment" that might or might not be deployed) than we find among the sets of instructions in the synoptic gospels... The critics of any Jewish Cynic Jesus thesis tend to ignore or dismiss such inconvenient data, preferring, as noted earlier, a clearly defined Cynic appearance with which to contrast a clearly defined early Christian self-presentation. Yet to appear poorly dressed, to draw attention to yourself with a message encouraging poverty while relying on others' support, is, in much of the first-century east Mediterranean world, certainly quite enough to risk being seen as a Cynic."*³⁹⁷

Such an appearance, physically but no less in terms of the reasoning behind it, certainly does stand out in purely Jewish context. I have already noted in my discussions of Jesus as an itinerant how he encouraged leaving home, family and work for a life of homeless wandering, preaching the kingdom of God. How do we explain this in purely Jewish context? Do we need to when a Cynic model is so close at hand? Is it beyond the bounds of all historical possibility with all the numerous blind spots and lack of information we

396 Ibid., p.1129.

397 Ibid., pp.1123-1124.

have about his first followers and about Jesus himself? Personally, I cannot believe that it is. Once more, we are not arguing here that Jesus is a convinced Cynic. We are suggesting that enough Cynic influence exists that Jesus can meld some of this with his more Jewish concerns. As Downing makes the point himself: "The gospel evidence (in the absence of conclusive evidence to the contrary) seems to indicate a sufficient presence of popular Cynic influence within Galilean Israelite culture, to allow Jesus to make his own selection and form his own Jewish-Cynic synthesis, and be understood."³⁹⁸ What's more, "Deploying much the same standards with much the same rigour as serve other competing hypotheses (no easier, no harsher), Jewish and Cynic elements in the early Christian movement, and specifically in the Jesus tradition, seem clearly arguable,... and to deserve open-minded appraisal."³⁹⁹

Cynics were, in one respect, deep-seated cultural critics of their societies at the most fundamental level. The very way they lived their lives denied and stood as a rebuke to the way everyone else did. In putting forward the thesis of a Jewish Cynic Jesus it is suggested that he was doing something similar from his own cultural location. His itinerancy, I would argue, as his message to the rich and about the poor, was a Jewish Cynic expression of this. Cynics called out artificiality and pretence wherever they saw it. So, it seems, did Jesus too. We can argue the similarities are coincidence, of course. Yet this risks setting Jesus in history as a novelty. Better, I think, to make a case for a Jewish Cynic Jesus who syncretizes both sides of that formulation in an idiosyncratic way to become a cultural critic of a different kind, one who does not just speak about the kingdom of God but acts it out and performs it here and now in a way that appears a very Cynic expression of Judaism and Jewishness indeed."

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p.1132.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p.1136.

This thesis must have impressed me, based on such arguments, because, when I decided to write a third book on the subject, I called it *Jesus of Galilee, Son of Dog!* The “Jewish Cynic Jesus” thesis was now a pathway I was explicitly following – but by explicitly laying emphasis on both adjectives in that description: Jesus, so I thought, must be imagined as both Jewish and Cynic in some mixture together at the same time. This guiding belief would continue on throughout the rest of my work on the subject. In the fourth of four sections in my third book this was written about further in a section headed “Cynic Prophet Jesus”. This chapter begins, however, with a methodological, or perhaps practical, description of what I had been doing up until that point and why and where this had led me:

“‘The original is irrecoverable.’ - Robert M. Price

In this book I have surveyed especially Jewish and latterly Christian attitudes to language, writing, speech and books in my first chapter, arguing that an understanding of Jesus and his interpreters fits comfortably within the notion of sacred writing and sacred books and is implicated in, and illuminated by, Jewish religious conceptions of these things. (This is the chapter “Textual Jesus” included in this book.) In my second chapter I provided literary remembrances of Elijah and Elisha, of Diogenes of Sinope and of Jesus, inviting readers to connect them, or not, as they will. In my third chapter, which was concerned with written information about Jesus, historical and literary, I provided a set of guidelines for historical Jesus and gospel study (also included in this book) and two databases of material. The first database was a tabulated synopsis of all the material in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Thomas which has parallels and gives a thorough picture of how they are interrelated. The second was my own positive analysis

of the entirety of the known Jesus tradition, the material I regarded as evidence of Jesus' authentic life and character. Now in this chapter I want to build upon all this database creating and intertextual reading to produce the fullest image of the man Jesus that I have yet attempted in the three books I have written to date. This will be my fiction of Jesus the man as I imagine we could have experienced him in Galilee, the Decapolis or Judea in the first century of the Common Era.

But to do this I had first needed to explain the philosophical basis of my work, what historical methodology I was using and to give hints as to what I was seeing in the relevant texts (otherwise called building my hypothesis). This process began with *The Posthistorical Jesus* and continued through *The Gospel of No One*. In this book I have focused on literature, on books and what they say, and on their content and language, as the basis of the body of any kind of Jesus that we will ever be able to construct. Jesus is now found in books and he is conceived of using and utilising language. This is now and forever his risen form for if there ever was any flesh to poke, there isn't now. There are just words. There are just books. There is just writing. This writing, now, is interpretational construction from documents that tell stories about Jesus but that aren't themselves Jesus. In fact, the writing down of stories, sayings and deeds about (and of) Jesus itself, in gospels, was a portentous act, as writing something down always is. Writing tends to fix things in people's minds and seems to make it "present". As an *aide memoire* this might be regarded as harmless yet in another way it is not for it makes static what never was. Writing, for all too many, builds dynamism out, it canonises a way of seeing or imagining or speaking of things. Writing about something starts to make people think "It happened like this, exactly like this, and only like this. Anything else is

incorrect.” It leads to interpretations as static as the reconstructed texts they are based on and petrifies what was once vibrant, plastic and fluid.

Writing about Jesus, and the attitudes about “writing about Jesus” that become necessary because we are dealing with *writing*, and which we call “interpretation,” present constructors of Jesus with interesting problems. Perhaps the first thing these writings, and I primarily mean gospels, present us with is the reading strategies of those who begin to read them. I am continually staggered in my studies by how much of biblical reading these days is made up of usually white, usually politically conservative and usually confessionally evangelical (a softer word for “fundamentalist”) types of reading.⁴⁰⁰ In my regular searches for bibliographical material these searches are blighted by documents screeching about “inerrancy” or “the trustworthiness of the bible” or the same’s “inspiration” or about telling me why something, regardless of any apparent contradictions or lack of verifiability, is true. (As even one so on the side of the angels as Dale Allison has written, a lack of verifiability is often the most purely historical truth.)⁴⁰¹ Often, this truth is narrowly defined as historically true because, as such people read, that it happened is enough and meaning is not a problem. But why is meaning not a problem? Because such people already know how they are going to read - for their beliefs - and historical information is merely grist for the interpretational mill of white,

400 The ability of scholars such as Scot McKnight, for example, to get away with pretending to be historical scholars is laughable when their entire careers are based in faith-based apologetics and writing essays such as “Why The Authentic Jesus is of No Use for the Church” in *Jesus, Criteria and the Demise of Authenticity* (eds., Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne: T+T Clark, 2012), pp. 173-185.

401 See Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Fortress, 1998), chapter 1, for more on this. This, by the way, was the more optimistic version of Allison. In the matured version, as evident in *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, History* (Baker Academic, 2010), chapter 1, Allison can write: “In addition to being persuaded that the standard criteria much more often than not leave us with an uncertain verdict, I am haunted by what we now know about the frequent failings of human memory. This instills modesty and reinforces my conviction that the historicity of most-not all-of the events associated with Jesus and the origin of most-not all-of the sayings attributed to him will always fall woefully short of demonstration.” Contrast the views, from a similarly mild conservative point of view, of Richard Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006) where, apparently, designating gospels (but, of course, only the “orthodox” New Testament ones) as “eyewitness testimony” makes all the difference.

conservative (or white conservative's) Jesus. Does it need saying again that all we can know for sure about this Jesus is that he didn't exist because he couldn't have?

In writing the three books I have now written on Jesus I have read a number of scholar's works on the subject. They would not all agree with each other in their conclusions. But I have found some interesting commonalities that cross the historical and confessional divides they share between them. One such, best and most conclusively put by Robert M. Price, is that Jesus, should he have existed (and I am still minded to think he did!), is gone. He is lost to history. As Price is quoted at the head of this chapter, "The original is irrecoverable." I'm not so convinced myself that this is even a particularly modern phenomenon. Reading the five gospels, six if you include Q which is New Testament material in any case, it seems to me as if Jesus is *already* lost. Can we believe the narrative framework of Mark, certainly known to Matthew and Luke and possibly also known to John, is a *historical* framework? The more I read, the less I think so. But its definitely a *literary* (and so fictional) one. The religiously conservative will shudder at such a suggestion for, as one conservative evangelical scholar I have corresponded with put it, "The main question to ask is: if the New Testament writers are not trustworthy, then how do we know what Jesus is like so that we have something against which we can measure the trustworthiness or otherwise of the gospel writers who tell us about him?"⁴⁰² The hermeneutics of such people hinge on a singular trust and certainty. Their reading strategy is based on not being deceived or being blind to "the truth" (whatever that is, whispers Pilate).⁴⁰³ Consequently, their texts must be transparent windows to such epistemologically fixated truth *for that is the point of their texts at all*. And so they

402 Ian Paul writing on his conservative evangelical blog, www.psephizo.com.

403 Jn 18:38.

spend much of their time saying they are and acting as if they are. Here opponents will not be fighting books but certain (very modern) ways of reading them.

But I cannot bring myself to read these books this way and that should have been obvious right from *The Posthistorical Jesus* when I started talking about “fiction”. Yet it is important to note that even though I see the gospels as essentially fictional documents I have never thought this made them either useless or worthless. I have also never thought their historical worth was totally without merit. But I did think that to get anything historical out of them one had to start with a suspicion of their narratives and with an intention to read contrary to their conclusions. If you read as much about Jesus as I do, which means reading all sorts of conclusions people come to about reading the gospels, you find that even those who set out on purpose to debunk or screw up traditional pictures of the gospels, ones that set out to validate the stories, are quite happy to believe even the more dubious bits of the gospels where it suits them. Only the other day in one such book I read the fevered fantasies of someone who thought Jesus had been the king of Edessa, a Syrian town north of Palestine.⁴⁰⁴ The thesis was frankly crazy but it was noteworthy because it involved reading every necessary bit of gospel fantasy, such as Jesus fleeing to Egypt as a child with his parents in Matthew’s birth narrative, as true because it suited the purposes of the ideas being put forward. Such reading is merely another type of fundamentalism, one in which books are there to validate “what I want to think” even where that is utterly opposed to even non-dogmatic scholarship on Jesus.

If we ask ourselves how we should take the content of the books called gospels, particularly the six Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Q and Thomas, then I think we learn a lot

404 Ralph Ellis, *Jesus, King of Edessa* (Edfu Books, 2012).

simply by looking at how they relate to each other. This is a lot of the reason why, in this book, I went to the trouble of working on Kurt Aland's synopsis of the gospels, adding in references to Thomas. I wanted my readers to have access to such material to explore it for themselves for, in doing so, one is confronted with the notion of *gospel relationships* rather than, as you might have sat in pews, static gospel texts that say "it was like this" but without the contrary view of someone else who knew very well the text you've just read *but changed it anyway*.

Of course, I do not here mean to say that gospel writers were inveterate corrupters of their sources but any reasonable reader of the gospels can see that changes have taken place and these changes are too regular to be random or due to the vicissitudes of historical transmission. Instead, there are redactional patterns, writers writing to their community's inclinations and for their own purposes. This, at least, is what we can say about the narrative gospels of our six. With the sayings collections Q and Thomas it is more difficult to say anything at all. What I think we can say is that back then, when these things were being created, no one was overly concerned about writing something, even if it altered or changed a source, if it said something afterwards that they thought was meaningful about their subject. And, for example, if Mark can write one thing, Matthew can change it, Luke can omit it, John can recast it entirely, Q can give a reminiscence of something similar and Thomas combines it with something else with a twist of its own at the end then why should we take a view that "gospel truth is sacred"? *Its not*. These gospel writers happily changed, split, recombined, omitted and added whatever they liked and they didn't think for a minute they were doing anything invalid. They were talking about the Jesus *they* knew. They were telling the stories, or transmitting the thoughts, of the Jesus *they* knew. And this is without even mentioning

the processes of oral transmission or scribal copying by which we come to receive them at all.

This is a world away from the historical certainties and singular truths of fundamentalist readers who, due to their self-imposed readerly prisons, condemn themselves to forever fight a rearguard action against the literary truths evident in the books before them. Their “historical” readings actually deny the redactional histories of the books they claim as authorities. If one book changed the text of another then *that is* the history not that they now both somehow fit within a more complex singular truth neither source imagined that they are now both read, contrary to “the plain sense of the text” (something often claimed as beloved by such readers), as witnesses to. This, where it is evident, is an obvious readerly choice (harmonization) rather than a strategy recommended by the text. Texts contain information but that information is rarely “Please read me like this.” Much less is it “Please read me in a certain way with other texts you may value.” This is to say that Matthew never thought you needed Mark as well to understand Jesus and neither did Thomas think you needed John. Nor did Luke think you needed Q. Each thought their own product was sufficient. In thinking about these gospels I often wonder if any of the gospel writers expected readers to think that their frameworks, where they are narrative, were to be taken as strict, historical chronology. This is important for if they aren’t (either as intention or as fact - but mostly as fact) then what we have are fictional frameworks and any notion of how any truth transmitted about Jesus in such books relates to other parts of the same dissolves and it all becomes construction. This, I think, is what Price means when he talks about a lost “original”. We have no authentic historical narrative to guide us. If the gospels contain any historical truths they are grist for the mill of believer’s fictions. Fiction here is not a dirty word

though, as I have tried to make clear in successive books. Fiction, indeed, is all you have. Fiction is the vehicle that any truth about Jesus is being carried in. Fiction was what Jesus himself used to convey truth.

So my own strategy, which integrity demands I foreground, is to read the gospels as the historical reminiscences of people who find meaning in Jesus. I read Mark as being equally as valid as Thomas, John as being as valid as Luke and Q as being as valid as Matthew in this respect. I do not draw bold lines between them although I do always make decisions about them. I read them *as books* (which means as wholes) and I read them against each other in a “compare and contrast” sort of way (which usually reveals holes). I observe their similarities and differences. I note where they want to take me and what they say I should believe. But I am wary of either going there or believing. I want to know what they share but don’t emphasize, what slips through the cracks of their narration or transmission of Jesus tradition. I want to see if what they say can be connected in other ways, both internally and to the imagined external social world in which they are set. I entertain the notion they are fictional constructs and that their characters are too but I don’t do this in such a way as to rule out, a priori, their existence. I recognise, in all these contexts, that any alternative constructions will be equally as fictional as are the ones before me for my consideration. But that doesn’t stop me constructing for what else can I do? Claim its all the truth and demonise any who disagree? Close my eyes and hope it all goes away? Live in a world of my own private fantasies? In my studies in *The Posthistorical Jesus*, *The Gospel of No One* and now also in *Jesus of Galilee, Son of Dog* I have taken none of these routes. Instead, I have published my own studies, given sources and put them somewhere anyone could read and criticize them. This is for my own good as much as anyone else’s for critics are often your best

friends. They will see what, and as, you don't see. For anyone interested in refining and progressing their thoughts this can be no bad thing. I try not to be a dogmatist and I do not say I am right. All I have written in my three books should be taken primarily as an invitation to read and think *for yourself*. This is what I want people to do. This, if you like, is "my angle".

And this is what I myself have done, relating myself to the scholarship of others, that both more and less immediately amenable to me, along the way. Of course, I remain responsible for my own thoughts and I do not think I have merely reproduced the thoughts of others although, clearly, my debts will be more obviously apparent to those with similar reading habits. I would also like to say that I have learnt as much from those I have disagreed with as those I find myself nodding along in agreement with. My sense, after my forebear in pragmatism, Richard Rorty, is that we study in a community of inquirers in a context of conversation.⁴⁰⁵ I have tried to make full use of this and my own works are entries into such a conversation about Jesus. Rorty is sure to point out, however, that such conversations do not have ends and so in no sense is this book, or my previous two, "the answer" to anything. They are, instead, dispatches from along the way. Here claiming to have a conversation-ending entry to the conversation is the only sin. It may be, of course, that certain conversations become less relevant and die out due to where the conversation itself takes us. That is OK. But in such conversations all one can do is suggest what seems important to you and why and hope to convince others that this is relevant as a subject of their conversations too.

⁴⁰⁵ This is also to suggest that inquiry into the historical Jesus, like inquiry into anything, is "a kind of writing." What this means is teased out by Rorty in "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida" in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 90-109.

But why is something important to you - or to me? It is worth hearing again the voice of a "Polish nobleman" once more:

*"Your judgment 'this is right' has a pre-history in your instincts, likes, dislikes, experiences, and lack of experiences. 'How did it originate there?' you must ask, and then also: 'What is it that impels me to listen to it?' You can listen to its commands like a good soldier who hears his officer's command. Or like a woman who loves the man who commands. Or like a flatterer and coward who is afraid of the commander. Or like a dunderhead who obeys because no objection occurs to him. In short, there are a hundred ways in which you can listen to your conscience. But that you take this or that judgment for the voice of conscience - in other words, that you feel something to be right - may be due to the fact that you have never thought much about yourself and simply have accepted blindly that what you had been told ever since your childhood was right; or it may be due to the fact that what you call your duty has up to this point brought you sustenance and honours - and you consider it 'right' because it appears to you as your own 'condition of existence' (and that you have a right to existence seems irrefutable to you)."*⁴⁰⁶

Having cited numerous motivations for our judgments, Nietzsche ends this same section of his book, however, with the following, specific recommendation:

"Let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the creation of our own new tables of what is good, and let us stop brooding about the 'moral value of our actions'! Yes, my friends, regarding all the moral chatter of some about others it is time to feel nauseous. Sitting in moral judgment should offend our taste. Let us leave such chatter and such bad taste to those who have nothing else to do but drag the

⁴⁰⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann: Vintage Books, 1974), section 335.

*past a few steps further through time and who never live in the present - which is to say the many, the great majority. We, however, want to become those we are - human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. To that end we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become physicists in order to be able to be creators in this sense - while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been based on ignorance of physics or were constructed so as to contradict it. Therefore: long live physics! And even more so that which compels us to turn to physics - our honesty!"*⁴⁰⁷

By "physics" here I take Nietzsche to mean people who "know how to observe something" and people who "observe themselves" which is how this section I have quoted from begins. Nietzsche's complaint is that people don't, or don't know how, to do such things. Instead, they become tangled up in the (always socially constructed) moralities of knowledge rather than the "honesty" that Nietzsche himself recommends. We can see this in every biblical reading community that tells people what they are and are not allowed to read from the texts. I take Nietzsche's recommendation of honesty, in turn, to be the reading and thinking for yourself that I am recommending of the gospels as tools for constructing Jesus. Here "sitting in *moral* judgment" should indeed "offend our taste" for we should want *to become those we are* and we should explore that possibility, not in spite of the world but because of it. We should see as we do see and not as we are told to see, have been taught to see or are disciplined by a readerly morality to see. We are "born guessers of riddles who are, as it were, waiting on the mountains, posted between today and tomorrow, stretched in the contradiction between today and tomorrow."⁴⁰⁸ Such a true honesty transcends all readerly morality

407 Ibid.

408 Ibid.

and is beyond the good and evil of any reading community. Remember, the gospels themselves say what they see and not just what others saw. If you need historical warrant, well, there it is.

And that is what I want to do now in my imagining and constructing a Jesus from the gospels. Over the course of the three books I have written this character has come to express itself in my thinking as the following equation:

$$\text{ELIJAH} \times \text{DIOGENES} = \text{JESUS}$$

That, at least, is the way it might be explained in shorthand using personalities. For avoidance of doubt, I do not think Jesus is a copy of Elijah or of Diogenes. So we could equally say Prophet x Cynic = Jesus to suggest that there are prophetic characteristics, in the Hebrew tradition, that inform a view of a historically constructed Jesus and that there are Cynic characteristics which do the same thing. This is my attempt to square the circle of the myriad images of Jesus that people think they see in the texts and then write about. Often, this is criticised as when Price complains that many of these images are convincing in themselves but cannot all be right.⁴⁰⁹ The answer to this is that they can and they can't. Ten people will see ten different people when they look at the same person. For them, they are all right. For an outside observer, some may be more on point than others. But these are all just interpretations of each other and interpretations are what they are. Each is subject to its own critique and analysis, to its own specific groundings and origins. An interpretation can only be criticised from inside another one. We operate not with absolutes but with conditioned points of view. This, indeed, is why the conversation I referred to above is often so important for it helps to refine, or ideally

⁴⁰⁹ For example, in his *Deconstructing Jesus* (Prometheus Books, 2000).

should help to refine, all the interpretations as the conditions imposed on our views are related to each other and then condition those same interpretations. We should also never forget that it is interpretation which even makes conversation possible. The only possible answer to an absolute view which claims total control is silence.

So to progress my fictional construct of Jesus the traditions into which I want to set Jesus as contexts are these Prophetic and Cynic ones. They reveal, I believe, a specific example of a Galilean Jewish Cynic: *Jesus of Galilee, son of dog*. I believe this understanding can be plausibly fitted into first century history at least as well as many of the others that are regularly bandied about (which seems to be just fine where they are concerned) and I believe that evidence in the gospels can be used to support it. Am I saying Jesus was like this? I'm saying that, as things stand, this makes most sense to me as the fictional construct or interpretation I use to make sense of things. To have come to this point I have three reservoirs of thoughts which inform my path, those about Hebrew prophets, those about Hellenistic Cynics and those from my work with the gospels.

So in this chapter I am to give a dissertation on my own picture of Jesus as I see him historically, via the literature we have available to us."

What I did next in *Jesus of Galilee, Son of Dog* was compare texts from Matthew, John and Thomas on the logic "if you want to see what people think of Jesus then read their books and compare them." This was as prelude to my own argumentation and construction which built on the "Jesus was itinerant and this may be suggestive of Cynicism" thesis I had latched onto before. "Cynic Prophet Jesus" was argued like this:

"Thesis/Antithesis/Synthesis"

Having compared some gospel fictions, and having seen how gospel writers shape the traditions they receive, we now turn to my own. The fiction of Jesus that I now intend to give will be a controversial one. It is primarily controversial not because it is weird or wacky but because it integrates two images of Jesus which, in many other places, are often thought of as opposing views. These opposing views might be described as the "apocalyptic prophet" view and the "wisdom teacher" view. An example of this opposition, if not faultline in Jesus scholarship, going back decades if not now centuries, is the book *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate*⁴¹⁰ edited by Robert Miller which features a scholar who supports the idea of Jesus the apocalyptic prophet, Dale Allison, who is opposed by three scholars more on the wisdom teacher side of the fence, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and Stephen Patterson. The reason for this is that the book seems to be based on the three on the wisdom side of the fence critiquing Allison's 1998 book, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, a book I have referenced before, which is one of the better books on Jesus the apocalyptic prophet from recent decades. Besides discussing this particular way to understand Jesus it also discusses how this Jesus, or any Jesus, should be found and so it addresses both the question of who is there to find and what the best way to find him is. If we go through the positions outlined in the debate this book presents it will help us address my own Jesus fiction and how we reach the conclusions which motivate it.

The book opens with Allison outlining a brief case for Jesus the apocalyptic prophet.

This case can be summarised in 6 points:⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate* (ed., Robert J. Miller: Polebridge Press, 2001).

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-29.

- 1). Jesus is preceded in the tradition by an apocalyptic precursor, John the Baptist, and followed by apocalyptically-minded apostles like Paul or the canonical gospel writers who speak of things like resurrection, a clear apocalyptic motif. Thus, on the simple basis of consistency, Jesus should be thought to fit between them in a line of continuity.
- 2). The second point follows from the first in that Jesus was spoken of by his followers as significant in the apocalyptically eschatological terms of resurrection.
- 3). In the broad sweep of the gospel tradition, and of the wider New Testament, Jesus is shown to inspire eschatological expectation.
- 4). Allison argues that a prophetic eschatological expectation was a cultural norm of the time in first century Palestine, a facet of popular consciousness. Thus, it would be a prevalent agenda to address.
- 5). Jesus is contemporaneously compared to other eschatological figures of his time such as Theudas or Judas the Galilean but primarily John the Baptist, suggesting some measure of similarity for comparison to be viable.
- 6). Allison's final point is to make a general observation about the gospel traditions. He argues that there are numerous eschatological sayings attributed to Jesus and that we need to take a view on this as a whole. If we judge that the gist of these is FALSE then we are actually making a case that the whole picture the gospels give is faulty and ANY evidence is unreliable. Allison thinks it unlikely the writers remembered the gist of Jesus incorrectly whilst remembering accurate content. But, if we imagine they did, then it

simply means we cannot trust them, or verify anything, at all. (As discussed in my earlier chapter "Deconstructing Jesus".)

The last point here immediately gets my attention for when reading it I ask myself how we might imagine the documents that we take as evidence for Jesus, primarily the canonical gospels, came to be. We must imagine that those writing had concerns and that these concerns acted, in some measure, as filtering or shaping devices on the texts they produced. So, if we ask the question, "How would the Christians have changed or skewed or redacted the material they received when they wrote gospels?" I think the answer, from their "post-resurrection" perspective, is clearly "in an apocalyptic eschatological direction" because that is their interpretation of things now. We cannot imagine them de-apocalyptizing the material, for example, for their faith had been birthed in a belief in resurrection, an apocalyptic eschatological marker. So, in other words, they write in the light of the resurrection and its meaning which is the context for anything they will relate at all. In fact, their apocalyptizing the material would also have de-emphasized any non-apocalyptic (such as wisdom) material evident, not least by recontextualizing it. It is much more difficult, however, to imagine an apocalyptically eschatological tradition that became redacted by a wisdom mentality or, indeed, to find any motive for such a redactive enterprise. (Where we find different redaction, in Thomas, it is ultimately protology and not eschatology that leads the way. Its still not wisdom.)⁴¹² So I think that Allison puts the cart of the first Christians before the horse of Jesus here in his generalized observations about the Jesus tradition. And the most important thing about carts and horses, in this case, is that the horse doesn't get to decide what goes in the cart; Jesus had no say in how he was redacted or presented in

⁴¹² Its also worth noting that I resist the notion that the Gospel of Thomas should be described as simply "wisdom" at all in any case. It seems much more interested in knowledge than wisdom to me. Knowledge of an ultimate sort.

books, he was a mute recipient of whatever he was given to speak. So we shouldn't necessarily look to them for him.

I want to now address the arguments that were made opposing Dale Allison's view in *The Apocalyptic Jesus* starting with the views of Marcus Borg. His argument can be summarised in 5 points:⁴¹³

1). There are good, historical reasons for apocalyptic Christian explanations of Jesus, not least Caligula's attempt to place his statue in the Jerusalem Temple in the early 40s CE and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Romans.

2). Borg strongly believes that you cannot resolve the issue of the historical Jesus aside from detailed work in the texts (which Allison had eschewed in favour of generalised observations about the tradition as a whole). It is not enough, thinks Borg, to give hypotheses about the "Jesus tradition" as a whole. The argument in his mind is exactly about the particularities of the tradition and judgments about them. To not do such work is, in a way, arguing on the cheap (my own description of Borg's view rather than his way of expressing it). So you cannot argue for a paradigm aside from an accompanying analysis of the texts.

3). Very few (synoptic) sayings of Jesus require an apocalyptic understanding to make sense.

4). Borg argues that apocalyptic eschatology in the gospels is "second coming of Jesus" eschatology, that is post-Jesus rather than of Jesus, cart not horse.

⁴¹³ Ibid., pp. 31-48.

5). Apocalyptic as a primary hermeneutical key seems to warp or twist the meaning of many sayings of Jesus in Borg's view making "the end is near" the interpretive matrix of all of them. It does not make the best sense of them though in his view. (We might add it was also incorrect as the end *wasn't* near!)

Next in line come the views of John Dominic Crossan who outlines concerns about eschatology but also methodology which those, in general, on the "wisdom" side of the historical fence also took issue with Allison about. Crossan is summarised in 7 points:⁴¹⁴

1). Crossan believes that an analysis of materials comes before method but also that results depend on methods and methods depend on materials. Thus, he refutes Allison's generalised view as Borg did.

2). Crossan characterises the Jesus tradition which goes from speech to books as a very "absorptive tradition," a matter involving much "rewriting." This is important as his views about how the tradition developed inform his views about Jesus.

3). Crossan sees his own Jesus as eschatological but not apocalyptic. He enunciates this in a set of binary choices such as destructive/transformational, negative/positive and material/social where he always favours the second option and sees apocalyptic as the first.

4). Crossan envisions the scholarly task as inventory and interpretation... and diversity. He thinks that if we can't agree on what to argue about (i.e. what inventory) then we are just bandying about different texts instead, never discussing the same things. This also

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 48-69.

encompasses the view that decisions must be made and the texts can't just be taken "as is". He understands that people will always have different opinions (diversity) but doesn't understand why they cannot (even try to) agree on an inventory.

5). Crossan notes that Allison had stated in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* that "the burden of proof is on those making arguments". Crossan retorts that if "the burden of proof is on those making arguments" then it applies no less to gospel writers. He then questions if a given gospel writer has "proved" that Jesus said or did something.

6). Crossan states, against charges he seems very certain, that the whole of his reconstruction of Jesus is always in question.

7). Crossan believes that resurrection is part and parcel of apocalypticism and stands or falls with it. This is to say that if Jesus the apocalyptic prophet is incorrect then resurrection is simply a hermeneutical device of Christian writers and communities about Jesus.

Allison's final correspondent in *The Apocalyptic Jesus* is Stephen Patterson whose contribution is summarised in the following 5 points:⁴¹⁵

1). Gospel criticism has shown that a wisdom layer is interpreted by an apocalyptic one.

2). Patterson suggests that "Kingdom of God" is wisdom terminology not apocalyptic terminology and points out that neither Mark 13 nor Q Gospel 17 mention "kingdom of God" in these clearly apocalyptically-charged sections of text. In contradistinction,

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 69-82.

parables of Jesus that say "the kingdom of God is like" are not about God's imminent apocalyptic intervention.

3). Patterson, as Borg and Crossan, argues that gospel criticism, and an explanation of the gospels' formation, is once again informative. There are, he thinks, clearly strands of emphasis and writerly interests at play. So we must account for how they come together and are best explained as of first importance. Thomas and Q are here important, says Patterson, and Paul's letters testify to both apocalyptic interpretations of Jesus and wisdom understandings as equally old and contemporaneous.

4). Patterson questions whether general observations (so Allison) or detailed criticism (Borg, Crossan and himself) are more appropriate as hermeneutical strategies. Allison noticeably shies away from dissecting texts and creating tradition histories as does a fellow scholar more on his side of the fence, Tom Wright, who has been a prominent speaker for an apocalyptically flavoured Jesus. Patterson, however, believes that "only" historical critical analysis of sources can inform us properly.

5). Perhaps Patterson's major point is that Allison simply has the Jesus tradition, and the first century history, wrong. Allison, for example in his first point about continuity, simply gets the facts wrong. Patterson argues that early Jesus movements were not homogenous (and apocalyptically so for Allison) but *heterogenous*. There was not one view about Jesus, the right apocalyptic view, from which others were deviant and so wrong. There were always *multiple* views. So there is no mainstream which must be basically right and so accepted as Allison seems to suggest.

There is much in this discussion that I think is of worth to us moving forward. Certainly, I agree with Borg, Crossan and Patterson that there is no chance to produce a Jesus who fits some paradigm (or any paradigm) outside of an accompanying textual analysis. *You simply have to show your working out and get in amongst the texts to show which ones reveal their authenticity to you and which do not.* So you need to do source critical work (which Allison has himself done much of, producing a major commentary on Matthew with his teacher, W.D. Davies, and work on the Q Gospel)⁴¹⁶ and you need to do work on the tradition as a whole to at least attempt to model how you think it may have been created and developed. Allison himself knows and does this as he certainly provides texts in support of his views yet refrains from the full discussion of how the Jesus tradition developed preferring to say “either we can trust these books as we read them or we can’t trust them at all.” This, I think, is a mistake. Historical study (because it is interpretation) goes all the way down and at no point accepts evidence unquestioned just because it is there. It is because scholars like Borg, Crossan and Patterson have done this that they can then make supporting arguments about the tradition as a whole (such as Patterson’s that a wisdom layer is apocalypticized with which I agreed in critiquing Allison myself) which help to create a fuller picture of the history and where Jesus fits within it.

So, in this respect, Crossan’s concerns for a common inventory are valid and are why I have based my work on the shoulders of such a giant in my series of books on Jesus. You must describe what it is you see in the texts and then provide your inventory of relevant texts together with your explanation of why other texts were left out, if necessary.

⁴¹⁶ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew* (Republished Edition; ICC, 3. Vols.:T+T Clark, 2004), Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Jesus Tradition in Q* (Trinity Press International, 1997) and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Trinity Press International, 2000).

It is my judgment that most of Allison's argument can be explained by the view that it is those with an apocalyptic eschatological outlook who get to write what become the canonical texts about Jesus. This is born out in numerous views about the texts of the tradition whether Q, which, as Patterson describes, has "a wisdom layer interpreted by an apocalyptic one" following John Kloppenborg's influential analysis of its content or the synoptics generally which are tinged with apocalyptic discourse and subsumed under the apocalyptically eschatological theme of resurrection. The Jesus of John, we may note, is bright shining as the Son, God himself directly intervening in the world, whereas Paul places all his bets on the risen Jesus in an apocalyptic understanding of the man he never knew. Finally, Revelation gives us the full trumpet blast of apocalyptic vision as Jesus the slain becomes Jesus the warrior on horseback. In Crossan's view this is a case of "the wronger it got, the stronger it got."⁴¹⁷ It is similarly my view that it was wrong and is not a useful construction of Jesus (not least because, as wrong, it leads nowhere).

And yet it is not *completely* wrong. To say that much of the tradition went through an understandable apocalypticizing phase is not to say that Jesus was not eschatological (a claim Crossan accuses Allison of making about him with some justification). It all depends how we understand eschatology and Crossan's differentiations are here important. One can, I think, imagine eschatology in a transformative, positive and social sense that is not about retribution or destruction (at least destruction in the sense of wiping people out) but it does, I confess, really matter quite a lot how you are going to define apocalyptic and how you are going to define eschatology. My guide here is how I read "kingdom of God" in the relevant texts. It seems to me to signify a present state of social and cultural transformation that is God-mandated, that reflects his understanding of how the world should be and that is formulated based on beliefs about him and

⁴¹⁷ For example, *The Apocalyptic Jesus*, p. 50.

reflecting them in human society. I understand it to be something that Jesus thinks is here amongst us now and that we bring about if we make certain choices, live certain ways and take up certain attitudes to life, the world and others and, of course, to God. I do not see how we could get this if what came first was a Jesus who said "Get ready for God's forceful imposition of his kingdom" which is how I summarise an apocalyptic agenda. But I can see how my understanding can come first and then be redacted and reoriented to the second, especially if you believe Jesus has been raised from the dead. That, indeed, almost mandates an apocalyptic explanation of, and context for, the whole which some might argue it eventually got in the Christian biblical canon.

Yet I do think Jesus spoke of God, and of what he believed God wanted, and that he did this "with authority" as the gospels have it (Mk 1:22). In Jewish context this makes it easy to see him as a prophet and if he recommends new ways to live and talks about it as "the kingdom of God" then why not as an eschatological kingdom? If he is talking about how God reigns in the hearts and minds of Jewish people once more so that the populace at large is renewed then I fail to see why this itself should not be regarded as an eschatological agenda. To be sure, it is not an apocalyptic agenda. But that is exactly the distinction that at least Crossan or Allison's three debate opponents makes. By giving up the direct destructive and retributive action of God himself we do not, thereby, give up eschatology too.

So my own tendency is to see Jesus as an eschatological prophet of a sort. I note well Allison's mention of John the Baptist, apparently a more authentic apocalypticist, as Jesus' precursor and even possible mentor.⁴¹⁸ But, to possibly contradict Allison, I do not believe that John simply makes a disciple of Jesus and makes him one who wanders

⁴¹⁸ See now especially Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, pp. 204-220.

about instantiating variations on the Baptist's views. I agree more with those who see some form of parting of the ways like Crossan or, more especially, Bruce Chilton in his book, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography*.⁴¹⁹ There Chilton argues that Jesus rejected John's notion of ritual purity, believing that people were already clean, and he came to replace John's baptism with communal meals (in which the pure and impure would mix making all impure) and, indeed, a new way of being the people of God, the people of his kingdom, whole and entire. Yet he did this in a prophetic way, what Borg calls being a "social prophet" in *The Apocalyptic Jesus*. (Allison seems to agree with this social aspect too.) The meals that Jesus took part in, scattered throughout the gospel records, were performances of the kingdom in the way that, formerly, John's baptisms had been too - but with a changed focus: not future but right now! Not merely God's action but ours too! In addition, this socially prophetic role was also peppered with what we now call wisdom, the sayings and parables of Jesus, sometimes condemnatory or acting as warning but at other times instructional. In a nutshell, that is a vision of a prophet AND a wisdom teacher. Jesus was not one or the other, as if they were mutually exclusive. He was both.

God's Kingdom of the Poor

If you asked me to give a slogan for what Jesus was historically about, I could give you one. That slogan is "Blessed are the poor!" (Q 6:20b) This four word phrase is where I start to think about Jesus historically and *it is this phrase that I think all interpretations of Jesus that claim to be historical have to explain in their constructions of Jesus* and it is what they have to explain the rest of the material in the light of. Saying that God's judgment is coming or that you should become like a child to enter God's kingdom is all very well but

⁴¹⁹ Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (Image Books, 2000). See especially pp. 41-63.

Jesus expressly makes this kingdom a place of the blessed poor. How can we possibly explain or justify such a belief, and cognate beliefs, which we find in the Jesus tradition such as “Whoever finds their life will destroy it; and whoever destroys their life will find it” (Q 17:33) or “The one who has become wealthy and has found the world should renounce the world” (GTh 110) or “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mk 8:35) or “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25)? Those Markan and Johannine sayings have clearly been redacted but it shows that the idea at the core of the saying was well known across numerous traditions and communities - and thought of value. So this kingdom of which Jesus speaks is a kingdom of the poor, of those “losing their lives” or “renouncing the world” and not, before someone jumps in, by martyrdom in a secondary exegesis of the ideas behind the sayings such as Mark and John here clearly took up. Jesus pronounced poverty, having nothing, renouncing wealth, as blessed. “The first will be last and the last, first” (Q 13:30 / Mk 10:31 / GTh 14:2) Why?

Leif Vaage and Vincent Wimbush edited an excellent book at the end of the last century entitled *Asceticism and the New Testament*.⁴²⁰ In it, Stephen Patterson (once more) pops up with an essay on *askesis* in the early Jesus tradition, especially focused on Q and Thomas material (often this is parallel material). Patterson quotes John Kloppenborg’s view of Q as presenting, “an ethic of radical discipleship which reverses many of the conventions which allow a society to operate, such as principles of retaliation, the orderly borrowing and lending of capital, appropriate treatment of the dead, responsible self-provision, self-defense and honor of parents”⁴²¹ before going on to

⁴²⁰ *Asceticism and the New Testament* (eds., Leif E Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush: Routledge, 1999).

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

detail the work of Gerd Theissen in the 1970s which was a sociological study of the early Jesus communities of Galilee as “wandering radicals”.⁴²² For Patterson, the sayings of Jesus we find in Q and Thomas may have fit this milieu as the occasion of their original performance. His thesis is as follows:

*“What these wandering radicals were doing was not so much a “mission” as it was askesis. They were understood by their contemporaries to be not so much “leaders” as “performers” exemplifying through their activity a new understanding of human existence and of human life lived faithfully to God.”*⁴²³

*“The itinerant social radicalism characteristic of the earliest sayings tradition is a form of askesis. It is a series of performances, done for others to see. The aim of these performances is to separate those who participate in them from the dominant social ethos, to create a new network of social relations in which an alternative symbolic universe might be articulated. And out of that new combination of activities, relationships, and discourse, those who participate begin to develop of new sense of self, a new way of being in the world, to which others might be drawn.”*⁴²⁴

*“The itinerants are no longer simple beggars, but agents of God’s reign. They are no longer themselves—artisans, farmers, fishers, clerks, weavers, maids—but have constructed and/or been constructed into a new subjectivity.”*⁴²⁵

422 See now Gerd Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christianity* (SCM Press, 2012).

423 *Asceticism and the New Testament*, p. 56.

424 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

425 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

It is Patterson's postulate that these people, the people we read about when Jesus gives his "mission instructions" from the gospel tradition at places like Mark 6 or Q 10, were natural ascetics. Here "natural asceticism" is a term for that type of living which is according to nature or living simply as opposed to the popular understanding of asceticism which is more typified by deliberately inviting or causing suffering to oneself. As Patterson himself puts it:

*"Natural asceticism... aims to reduce life to its simplest form—plain clothing, basic shelter, moderate fasting, drinking only water, sexual abstinence—to reaffirm creation's basic goodness and adequacy. The point is not to destroy the body, but to free it from the passions and thereby to return it to health."*⁴²⁶

Using a phrase of Bruce Malina's, Patterson describes this program and outlook as a matter of "shrinking the self," a form of reorienting one's subjectivity. It is exactly about becoming a different kind of person and, as part of a community that does this, of reshaping society itself. Patterson co-opts Richard Valantasis to help flesh out this notion of asceticism among the Jesus community:

*"Asceticism... may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe."*⁴²⁷

"Asceticism does not simply reject other ways of living (that is the misconception denoted by the negative implications of the word "asceticism"), but rather asceticism rejects

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

*precisely in order to embrace another existence, another way of living embodied in a new subjectivity, alternative social relations, and a new imaging of the universe. And this intentionality has power—power to create a new person, power to restructure society, power to revise the understanding of the universe."*⁴²⁸

Here Dale Allison's (and Bruce Chilton's) mention of that Jesus forbear, John the Baptist, becomes important since he is, perhaps, the most obviously ascetic figure in the gospels (as one dwelling in the desert wastelands by the Jordan river) and there was clearly something going on between him and Jesus which we intuit by how the gospels dance around treating the two of them together and John's baptism of Jesus itself. We should take note of how Matthew, Mark and Luke all find their own ways to parallel the two, having them line up in honour of the same kingdom program. (Matthew achieves this by giving them the same message at 3:2 and 4:17 of his gospel.) This route, however, is simultaneously impossible for John's gospel since there Jesus begins as a heavenly being yet even then the Baptist is enlisted to speak on behalf of Jesus and to "testify" both to him and to the fact that he himself is not such a big cheese in comparison (Jn 1:19-34). The historical take away from all this, as well as the later cameo to do with the Baptist being arrested and killed, is that the gospels wanted no confusion about who was who but that there must have at least been some possibility of confusion to begin with for them to be issuing their own clarifications.

Jesus himself, in the tradition, states that there was no one greater than John... except the least in the new kingdom he is preaching and teaching about (GTh 46, Mt 11:11 and Lk 7:28) which suggests honour yet also disparity. So it seems safe to agree with Allison here that Jesus and John were cognisant of each other and had some form of

⁴²⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

relationship, at least at one point. What or how this affected Jesus is a matter of speculation but clearly if Jesus was with John for any length of time he would have seen and practiced his lifestyle too giving him first hand experience of an expressly ascetic way of living. When we see Jesus sending out people with nothing, expressly making them reliant on the help of others, in other words, deliberately making them so poor they couldn't look after themselves, should we therefore be surprised? It is this Jesus who argues that such community members should not worry because god feeds the birds and clothes the flowers of the field (Q 12:22-31). If this is not Jesus reorienting people's understanding of themselves under God's rule (rather than private accumulation of wealth or commerce or even empire building) then I don't know what else it could be. At Mark 10:17-22 Jesus tells his rich inquirer who has followed the law all his life to sell all he has, become poor, have nothing, and follow him. The man goes away downcast for a kingdom of ascetic poverty was clearly not appealing to him.

I have a threefold reason for focusing on poverty and the kingdom Jesus preached. The first is the influence of John the Baptist on Jesus and his acquaintance with him, a noted ascetic. The second is the preponderance of "poverty talk," and so the need to account for this fact, in the Jesus tradition and the third is an interest in Cynic parallels exactly because of what those texts say. Especially relevant texts from my inventory in chapter 3 (this was the previous chapter in the book this is taken from) are as follows:

1+. Mission and Message (1a) 1 Cor 9:14; (1b) 1 Cor 10:27; (2) GTh 14:4; (3) Q: = Luke 10: (1), 4-11 = Matt 10:7, 10b, 12-14; (4) Mark 6:7-13 = Matt 10: 1, 8-10a, 11 = Luke 9:16; (5) 1 Tim 5:18b.

15+. First and Last: (1) GTh 4:2; (2) Q: Luke 13:30 = Matt 20:16; (3) Mark 10:31 = Matt 19:30.

23+. Blessed the Poor: (1) GTh 54; (2) Q: Luke 6:20 = Matt 5:3; (3) Jas 2:5.

26+. Blessed the Persecuted: (1a) GTh 68; (1b) GTh 69:1; (2a) Q: Luke 6:22-23 = Matt 5:11-12; (2b) Matt 5:10; (3a) 1 Pet 3:14a; (3b) 1 Pet 4:14.

36+. Saving One's Life: (1) Q: Luke 17:33 = Matt 10:39; (2) Mark 8:35 = Matt 16:25 = Luke 9:24; (3) John 12:25-26.

47+. Against Anxieties: (1) GTh 36; (2) Q: Luke 12:22-31 = Matt 6:25-33.

53+. Hating Ones Family: (1a) GTh 55:1-2a; (1b) GTh 101; (2) Q: Luke 14:25-26 = Matt 10:37.

56+. The Feast: (1) GTh 64:1-2; (2) Q: Luke 14:15-24 = Matt 22:1-13.

57+. Blessed the Hungry: (1) GTh 69:2; (2) Q: Luke 6:21a = Matt 5:6.

61+. Foxes Have Holes: (1) GTh 86; (2) Q: Luke 9:58 = Matt 8:19-20.

63+. Give Without Return: (1) GTh 95; (2) Q: Luke 6:30,34,35b = Matt 5:42.

65+. Jesus' True Family: (1) GTh 99; (2a) Mark 3:19b-21,31-35 = Matt 12:46-50 = Luke 8:19-21; (2b) Gos. Eb. 5.

71+. Eating with Sinners: (1a) Mark 2:13-17a = Matt 9:9-12 = Luke 5:27-31; (1b) Gos. Eb. 1c; (1c) Luke 15:1-2.

111+. The Rich Man: (1a) Mark 10:17-22 = Matt 19:16-22 = Luke 18:18-23; (1b) Gos. Naz. 16a.

113+. Become Passers By: (1) GTh 42.

119+. Finding the World: (1) GTh 110.

What this inventory shows is a Jesus who embraces poverty and sends out people who will be dependent on others. Jesus deliberately removes from those being sent the means for a better self-sufficiency such that they will have to rely on the land (thought of as God's bounty) but especially other people for food and shelter. This Jesus thinks the poor are the blessed ones and that the last will be first. What's more, he teaches that those who lose their life will save it and that those hearing him should not be anxious for their daily needs. He teaches that God's kingdom is like a feast and one in which God invites all who will come rather than the great and the good. The hungry, he teaches, will be filled and so his followers should not concern themselves if they have eschewed the natural protection of home and family. Human beings, says he, have nowhere to lay their heads. It is now the case that those who join this community are family so if you have you should give without expecting return, something which would make you poor as a logical

consequence, and so reduce your own situation in life to one of these poor. Jesus challenged anyone who came to him to forego their wealth or material security and follow him in a movement of the ascetic poor, those who were “passers by;” for Jesus, renouncing the world was finding authentic life and renewing Israel. If we ask how these poor were to survive, the answer was by an unshakeable reliance on God and a dependence on the community of those others who shared their mentality. To share with this community, but especially to share a meal, was for Jesus an example of God’s reign in action.

Meanwhile, in a paper published by the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, David Seeley makes the following claim:⁴²⁹

*“most students of antiquity would recognize as a Cynic one who: (a) was itinerant; (b) lived and preached a life-style of poverty; (c) criticized social norms - notably, family ties; (d) advocated reliance on God's power, (e) especially as that power is seen in natural processes; and (f) inhabits and invites others into a divinely established realm. Comparisons can be made with Jesus regarding each of these items.”*⁴³⁰

Seeley lists a selection of Q texts in support of this claim:

Itinerancy: Q 10:2-12; poverty: Q 12:33-34; 16:13; family: Q 12:52-53; 14:26; God's power: Q 11:9-13; 12:4-7; nature: Q 12:22-31; cf. 13:18-21; kingdom: Q 7:28; 10:9; cf. 13:18-21.

⁴²⁹ David Seeley, “Jesus and the Cynics Revisited” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), pp. 704-712. This paper is written as a response to an earlier one by Paul Rhodes Eddy, “Jesus as Diogenes? Reflections on the Cynic Jesus Thesis,” *JBL* 115, (1996), pp. 449-69.

⁴³⁰ Seeley, “Jesus and the Cynics Revisited,” p. 704.

Seeley does this because scholars wanting to set out a purely Jewish Jesus often claim that Cynicism is very disparate. Yet Seeley complains that scholars often talk about “Judaism” in first century context in great distinction to Cynicism, perhaps imagining, or at least not being clear and strident enough in disputing, that Judaism too was hardly a monoculture. He writes: “Were there really more differences among Cynics than there were between, say, Philo and the Qumran community? If not, then in principle we should be as willing to advert to the one tradition as to the other.”⁴³¹ And, of course, it matters that scholars often don’t do this, using Cynicism’s diversity as a stick to beat it with and imagining there are no markers of Cynicism by which to designate Jesus as a kind of Cynic, but when it comes to Judaism its equal diversity has no effect on the designation of Jesus as within the bounds of Judaism at all. It is more at the level of an assumption that he was and scholars then work to articulate him in such terms.

Yet it seems to me that if Jesus can easily be seen within the bounds of a diverse first century Judaism then he can also equally be seen as within the bounds of a diverse first century Cynicism, a philosophy itself known to value poverty and denigrate wealth which Jesus surely did, and with better Cynic precursors for this than Jewish ones. So surely even-handed scholarship requires such a concession, this equal treatment of evidence? Phenomena like Judaism or Cynicism evidence a broad spectrum of opinion and practice and we cannot demand that historical characters be those who tick off a pre-formulated checklist of boxes to be included within them. Yet, as Seeley has already pointed out, even such markers of the Jesus tradition as are evident seem to put Jesus within the bounds of antique Cynicism in any case. Should the scholarly proclivity to expound on his connection to Judaism also be relevant, as it surely is, then I submit that we have a double matrix to understand him within rather than a singular one. Jesus, at the very

⁴³¹ Ibid., p. 705.

least, evidences “family resemblances” to both and the poverty theme finds a *double* heritage.

Here the following paragraph from Seeley’s paper is very important:

“Such a connection does not, however, mean that Jesus was a Cynic. According to Eddy, ‘to claim that Jesus’ use of aphoristic wisdom and biting wit is best understood within the context of Hellenistic Cynicism is to miss the most plausible context: Jewish wisdom’.

But no one has said that Jesus’ use of Cynic thought kept him from using Jewish thought as well.

Downing says that Jesus fashioned a ‘marriage’ of Cynic ideas ‘with his own native Judaism and that Jesus the Jew must also be seen as Jesus the Cynic.’ Burton Mack says that Jesus’ speaking style is ‘very similar to the Cynic way with words.’

To be similar to one thing still allows for being similar to something else.

In fact, Mack has explicitly stated that he sees Jesus as using Jewish wisdom: ‘One might imagine Jesus doing at a popular level what many Jewish intellectuals did at a more sophisticated and conceptual level, namely, combining Jewish and Hellenistic traditions of wisdom in order to make critical judgments about the times and to propose a religious ethic held to be in keeping with Jewish ideals.’”⁴³²

⁴³² Ibid., emphasis mine. Note also F. G. Downing, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom* (SCM, 1987) and Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (Fortress, 1988) here as the supportive sources of Seeley’s points.

The point here is that designating Jesus within a Cynic family of ideas does not make him less Jewish or even non-Jewish (as several scholars have maintained in increasingly shrill tones in recent decades as the Cynic thesis has been presented). It makes him relatable to both areas of concern for we do not live in a world of such a necessary either/or. Seeley, at least, sees in the work of Downing, Mack and Crossan, three of the more vocal proponents of a Jesus related to Cynicism, no sense that this makes the same Jesus someone who cannot be related to his native Judaism as well. The point here is that a cardboard cut out version of either Cynicism or Judaism is simply bad scholarship. We should instead think of relationship to different forms of traditions and different expressions of practice and of both phenomena as a spectrum rather than as static and monotone. In the same way we do not need to think of Jesus joining a cabal of Cynics in order to speak of possible Cynic influence. We need only posit trade routes along which such people passed. Such went through Galilee and were even close to Nazareth. So why cannot Jesus' kingdom of the poor combine both Cynic and Jewish contexts that both thought worlds help explain and would have something to say about?⁴³³

Jesus the Cynic Prophet

I have argued that one needs to give a hypothesis about the development of the Jesus traditions into documents *about* Jesus together with a hypothesis about your construction *of* the historical Jesus. I want to do this by going back to the debate between Dale Allison and his interlocutors Borg, Crossan and Patterson. What I was most critical of there in Allison's position was his seeming singularity of vision, that an apocalyptic Jesus obliterated all other emphases in constructing him. Actually, in *The*

⁴³³ Seeley's comment, "Jesus and the Cynics Revisited," p. 710, seems wise in this regard: "One must not confuse the borrowing of parts of a culture with wholesale assent to that culture."

Apocalyptic Jesus Borg accuses him of this and Allison denies he is doing it so that may not be such a problem.⁴³⁴ However, I have tried to argue for a Jesus which combines the eschatological (but not apocalyptic) prophet of Allison with the wisdom teacher of Borg, Crossan and Patterson and to understand the latter in ascetic and Cynic contexts. We should note that the ascetic was a powerful part of the Cynic as well, as I showed in my discussion of Cynics in *The Gospel of No One* where askesis was shown to be an important part of Cynic performance. In this context mention of John the Baptist by Allison is right and proper and we should ask ourselves about the relationship of the apocalyptic and ascetic preacher of repentance to the figure of Jesus. It is my view that he influences Jesus more by his asceticism than by his apocalypticism and that Jesus could combine this Jewish asceticism with a more Cynic one of poverty in his own organisation of ideas in his head. I think it likely John was a formative figure for Jesus' own ideas but Jesus wasn't simply a carbon copy of John who moved around instead of staying in one place. He had related concerns but a very different expression of them.

So it is not that I disagree with Allison in his view that Jesus was an eschatological prophet. Rather, I disagree with him on how this was carried out in practice and I do not see this as apocalyptic. So, for example, I do not think we can link so tightly what later others will say or write about Jesus with Jesus himself. Jesus, we may say, should not automatically be made responsible for their views (whatever they are). Similarly, he is not responsible for what he inspires, as Allison has it. This is reading for continuity or naively assuming the things that are claimed. Allison may call this taking a view on the reliability of the whole but we may also call it a rhetorical strategy to preserve things as they are or a conservative reading strategy. So I am with those, such as Borg, Crossan and Patterson, who think that source, redaction and tradition criticism must be done and

⁴³⁴ *The Apocalyptic Jesus*, pp. 89-93.

that this will be crucial in providing an historical interpretation into which Jesus will be inserted. It is because they have done this as Allison has not that they come to a different point of view, one which ascribes the apocalyptic Allison sees to a likely later redaction or to a post-resurrection view of Jesus rather than a pre-crucifixion view held by Jesus. So Borg is right to point to events after Jesus but before books called gospels are published which might affect the views of the writers and the communities they were in. Time did not stand still after Jesus and so the views of those concerned with him were not static either: they were altered by events. Is this a powerful reason which motivates the “rewriting” of the “absorptive tradition” that Crossan references? And what about those gospel layers to which Patterson refers? No scholar seriously doubts the existence of different kinds of materials in the Jesus tradition, primarily those called apocalyptic or eschatological and those called wisdom. But, that being so, it must be explained. Those with their working out to hand can do this; those without can only say they trust the finished whole as a general remembrance but do so only with generalized reasons.

I am with Allison when he argues that there was a climate of eschatological expectation in Palestine in the first century and this helps me interpret Jesus as an eschatological character. Allison’s mention of The Baptist is here again persuasive as context as is this general background and even his mention of other figures, broadly eschatological, that Jesus can be compared to. But we must ask exactly what the point of comparison is here for it is not immediately clear and such figures should not be naively harmonized. Jesus can be seen as plugging into some eschatological idea or notion without him becoming apocalyptic. If we can give additional contexts and explain the apocalyptic shaping in other ways, and I am not alone in saying that we can, then a purely apocalyptic

description of Jesus becomes unnecessary. Here the context of the gospels and their writing is again important for understanding and explaining the historical Jesus. Allison talks about the gospels as a matter of remembering.⁴³⁵ But activity which creates gospels is not just about remembering - and remembering itself is not simply passive.⁴³⁶ It is the testimony of very many gospel critics that their texts are also at least as creative as they are the recording of remembrances and many who have recently worked on the gospels as memory have pointed out how talking about memory does not remove us from the world of interpretation.⁴³⁷ So to speak of memory or to take a view that such memory is trustworthy cannot remove us from the necessity for such things as source, redaction or tradition criticism as well because it is in using such tools that we might be better able to decide what kind of memory was active in the pursuance of historical construction when the gospels were written. In short, such work enlightens views on the gospels as memory, a category I would not wish to denigrate, just as much as other views, even ones the conservative might take as hostile to their Jesus.⁴³⁸

In this study I have taken the view that the gospels as a whole, certainly the canonical ones and Q which is incorporated now inside Matthew and Luke (Thomas is a special case in this respect), have been subject to apocalyptic eschatological interpretation and rewriting. This skews Jesus in an apocalyptic direction which is entirely understandable from the point of view of those who interpret Jesus as a risen son of God. But this is not to suggest that he did not himself hold eschatological views. Yet, as will be seen from my

435 Indeed, this is how he opens up his final Jesus book, *Constructing Jesus*,

436 Here Rafael Rodriguez would want to remind us most strongly that “oral tradition” plays a huge role in the formation of the *written* gospels and is much more than simply a means of communication. See his *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (Bloomsbury / T+T Clark, 2015).

437 Anthony Le Donne in his *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Eerdmans, 2011) is one good example.

438 In truth, the category of “oral tradition” in the matter of creating the gospels, boosted by a focus on “memory studies,” has been one of the growth industries in historical Jesus and gospel studies in the first two decades of the 21st century. Several of the 21st century books I’ve mentioned in my footnotes take up this dual concern or pay it attention. For many it is seen as the modern way to bolster the authenticity of both the canonical gospels and the Jesuses within.

positive inventory, I do not think he spoke of his death and resurrection, I do not think he thought his message was about him as an eschatological figure. Such aspects of the gospels are redactive, the thoughts of others about Jesus. They are cart not horse. I think there is much evidence that Jesus did have an eschatological subjectivity and that he was fully aware of the eschatological consciousness of the times. How could someone who had been with John the Baptist not be? However, his way of putting that into practice was to form a performative community of the ascetic poor, people who could easily have been interpreted in Cynical ways. He was not the Jesus of Albert Schweitzer who was so obsessed with ending the age that he made some desperate act in an attempt to change history.⁴³⁹ Instead, he simply preached and taught about changing how you live, he reoriented himself and others to those around them, changing their social, ethical and theological contexts in the process. It was not doing something to bring in the last days, it was simply living as if the last days were already here and their imagined bounty already available. I imagine Jesus thinking that if you want God's kingdom to come then live as if you would if it were here now. And, doing that, it will be.

This is eschatology in a meaningful sense for the last days are now lived performatively but it is also highly compatible with any reasonable notion of Cynic thought and sits reasonably well within a spectrum of such views. Jesus could then be seen as prophet of God's reign or wise teacher of Cynic virtue. Indeed, my argument is that Jesus is the point at which these two traditions of thought meet. He proclaims that Yah is my God (the meaning of Elijah) and also changes and defaces the currency of Palestinian society (as was said of Diogenes in relation to Greek society). Some, said he was son of God yet others saw him as only the prophetic son of dog. For me, in the end, it is only the latter

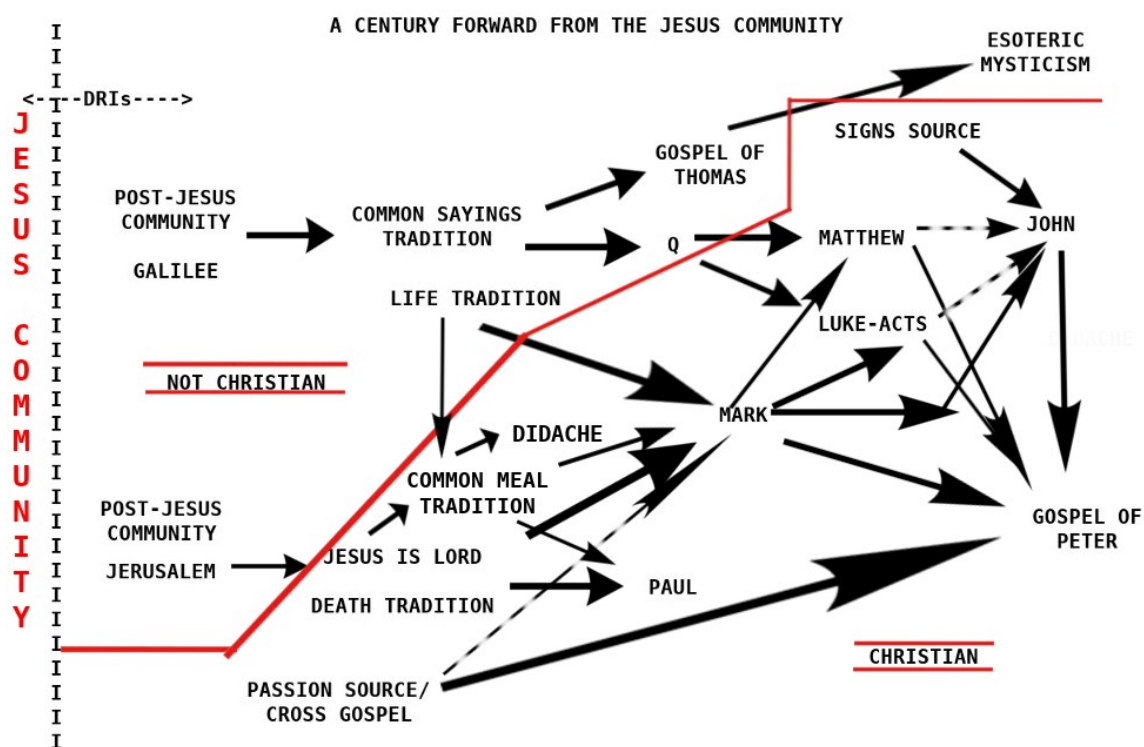
⁴³⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (First Complete Edition; trans. and ed. John Bowden: SCM Press, 2000).

which explains why Jesus would institute a kingdom of the itinerant, ascetic poor as a performative demonstration of the Jewish god he felt himself to be communicating. It was to Jews I imagine him speaking, in the main (although I do not suggest this was exclusively). It was the god of Judaism's reign that he attempted to model, perform and demonstrate."

After this, in my fourth historical Jesus book, I did not address my historical hypothesis directly at all. Instead, I critiqued some conservative pictures of Jesus which contradicted it and made some more generalised hermeneutical comments about what I thought was going on. Some of those discussions are in this book. In my fifth book, however, I returned to the thesis with a vengeance. One of the focuses of my work on Jesus has always been to establish that there are a variety of sources for the historical Jesus and that these sources tell *different* stories. Perhaps this was some sub-conscious attempt to counteract the notion the New Testament presents that there is only one image of Jesus (even though even there this is a harmonised one)? So my fifth book, *Jesus and the Community Gospel*, began by looking at Q, Thomas, the proposed "Gospel of Signs" thought incorporated in John, The Didache, an early Christian "community rule" and the Gospel of Peter. What I then wanted to do in this book is attempt the imagined necessary, but certainly very foolhardy, task of trying to make sense of how the ancient sources for Jesus fit together – and, indeed, what their relation to Jesus is or was. This resulted in three such chapters of historical imaginative speculation, one detached note on where Mark and Paul fit in with that, and two appendices, one which gave my version of an early "gospel" of an imagined Jesus community (that were NOT Christians) and another that appertained to a furtherance of my "Jewish Cynic Jesus" thesis.

Now it would make no sense, in a reader, to put all that in here. I would simply need to reproduce the whole book. So I must be judicious. But, by the same token, I must do the argument justice. So stick with it, it will make sense in the end!:

Interpretation and Tradition After Jesus: A Restated Proposal



A). After Jesus

The diagram above is this essay presented in diagrammatic form for in this essay I intend to present a putative reconstruction of oral and textual traditions that extend from the Jesus Community of the 20s of the first century in Galilee to beyond the 120s in the first part of the second century of the common era. It is important to remind oneself when looking at this diagram and reading this text, which is its accompanying explanation, that

the words *putative reconstruction* are both very important. This diagram and text are *putative* because they, and their alternatives, are not certain. They are evidenced suggestions or explanatory ideas, ways of explaining how we get from one point in time and place to another. It is my view that all explanation for the development of the thought and expression that flows forward from the time of Jesus through communities in Galilee, in Jerusalem and on into wider Syria (the Roman province not the modern country), down to Egypt and even on towards Rome, is strictly putative. No one actually *knows* what happened and it is unlikely we will ever have more than putative ideas such as the one I'm putting forward here to in fill the gap. Thus, what matters is the explanatory sense of these interpretations of fragments of history and literature that we are in receipt of. But we should also remember that besides being putative such interpretive solutions to ancient conundrums are also *(re)constructions*. I do not think that here we put Humpty Dumpty back together again but, unlike some academic scholars who have thrown up their hands in frustration and refused to go on any further, we keep trying even if we will never be able to claim the verification or the certainty about our results that we think we need. This diagram and text, then, will be interpretations of lines of tradition and as they are interpretations they will always be rhetorically challengeable. But so will any other solutions put forward that explain things in other ways too. That is the game we are in.

Some basic information about the diagram is in order before I get into the nitty gritty of its detail. The diagram progresses from left to right in terms of time. So the 20s of the first century are on the left, when Jesus was active in Galilee, and the second century is to the right when the Gospel of Peter appeared. When that was is not certain (as very little is here - you have been warned) but I take it to be by mid-century. Zigzagging its

way across the diagram, from bottom left to top right, you will see a red line. This separates Christian from what I regard as non-Christian tradition. From where this line is placed you should now be able to surmise that in my view no one in Galilee or Jerusalem was immediately a Christian upon Jesus' disappearance from the scene. Both Jerusalemite and Galilean forms of post-Jesus community will eventually develop in ways which become Christian but I don't conceive that the day after Jesus was gone (or 3 days after he was crucified) people in either place woke up and said "We are Christians now". Christianity was a result of traditions progressing and was a variegated process not an event. There are two sorts of arrows in my diagram. The most common is those in bold and they represent what I regard as lines of oral or written (I'm not differentiating this for the purposes of the diagram) tradition moving forward. Readers can regard these as influence in the direction the arrow is pointing and the influence being from where these arrows point. So, to give a simple example, my diagram suggests that Paul was influenced by the idea that "Jesus is Lord" and the accompanying "Death Tradition" which I site in Jerusalem. This Death Tradition is an interpretive focus on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. The second type of arrows in the diagram are dotted and should be regarded as even more putative than the diagram as a whole. They are less certain possibilities. There is but one more thing to note about the diagram before I dive in head first and that is to explain that "DRIs" are Destitute Radical Itinerants, people Jesus sent out preaching the kingdom of God. These preliminaries out of the way, we are now ready to understand the diagram in more detail.

The diagram itself is based on the work of a number of scholars, from the 20th into the 21st century, over many decades. These scholars themselves are in a tradition of biblical criticism which began to be applied to the New Testament in the early part of the 20th

century, primarily by the German scholar, Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann was concerned very much with the history of the traditions behind the New Testament and a line of scholars followed in the wake of his own scholarship and his methods for whom this was of prime importance too. Here I mention especially scholars such as Helmut Koester (an actual student of Bultmann's), James Robinson, John Kloppenborg, John Dominic Crossan and Stephen Patterson. All of these scholars, besides being experts in the Q Gospel, the Gospel of Thomas or both, follow a program in the study of Christian and pre-Christian history and literature which feels the need to explain how the documents we end up with come to be what they are. They are interested in tradition histories, forms of sayings and their development through time, how one tradition may influence others and associated things.

You may at this point imagine that this is something all historians of the New Testament period should be interested in. But you would be wrong. There are other scholars, often of a different philosophical or theological bent, who exhibit a startling lack of curiosity about such things. They would much rather take the attitude that history has left things a certain way and so we should, without curiosity, simply accept it and help to entrench its dominant position. I, and the scholars to whom I am in debt in writing this essay, cannot agree with that. For this kind of scholar, if you do not have a theory, an interpretive scheme which details interconnections between texts and oral traditions that leads forward from the Jesus Community, then you are just picking out texts at random with no organisational basis for doing so (at least that you have declared). So I agree most strongly with Crossan (and others) that having some theory of the tradition history is an essential to doing the work of explaining the historical Jesus or the emergence of Christianity and its first texts at all.

My tradition history begins, naturally enough, with the Jesus Community. I focus on that *as a community* rather than simply on Jesus himself for anything carried forward from this point relies on hearers and performers of the things Jesus said and did as much as it does on him himself doing anything. Here the concept of a tradition at all, and what it is, is very important. Primarily, of course, it is a community phenomenon. Jesus was not there whenever anyone talked about him and related what he had said and done. Neither was he responsible for how they told the story or even how they remembered it. In this sense, he was in the hands of those who spoke about him and he could only influence the direct communication from himself to those he communicated to directly. For any secondary communication of this (and beyond) it was out of his hands. This would even be the case for any of his closest followers in this community and later gospels will present occasions when Jesus seems to be quite seriously misunderstood even by such as these. (Although we should be wary of too easily believing such stories in artificial, creative literature such as this.) How much more misunderstood might he be by those not acquainted with him at all? This question becomes more important when we once again acknowledge the community aspect here and recognise that Jesus sent people out he had instructed in his way besides himself being the leader of an itinerant community. We should not imagine that those in this community just parroted his instructions like automatons. Rather, they would have interpreted it and presented it in their own subjective terms and, at each point, introduced novelty and variation. It was, we must be sure to realise, never just about Jesus. *In the beginning was the community.*

This point is brought home again when we come to the point at which Jesus disappears from the scene around 30 CE, crucified by Roman authority. Thereafter, I note two things immediately. Firstly, things don't just stop. Life, as the saying goes, goes on. Secondly, I

now note two quite separate post-Jesus communities, one in Galilee which is concerned with Jesus' life and focuses on what may be called the Life Tradition, an interest in what Jesus said and did in his life, and a second in Jerusalem, where Jesus died, that will focus going forward on that death and its significance and become the Death Tradition. There is, at this very early stage in this theory, little interplay between these two and it is the second, the Death Tradition, which will develop into a belief that Jesus is Lord and produce the Jerusalem church headed by James, the brother of Jesus, and come into contact, some years later, with Paul. Mention of Paul here is interesting since it has been noted many times that he seems to show virtually no interest in the life or teaching of Jesus. Perhaps the theory I'm supporting here explains why. As Paul was in contact with a post-Jesus community in Jerusalem who focused their attention on the death of Jesus it was this tradition he learnt and these beliefs he took up. This is what he "received" as the opening to 1 Corinthians 15 suggests in the early 50s CE. So it is perhaps quite likely that Paul knew very little about the actual life of Jesus which seems to exert so little influence on what he has to say anyway.

So if the post-Jesus community in Jerusalem will develop in ways which give significance to Jesus himself, and especially his death and resurrection, what about those in Galilee? Those in Galilee, I think, were not nearly so interested in this if we may divert from the regular history of Christianity narrative that you may be used to and that the New Testament itself has been organised to convince you of. This community was based on those who had seen and heard a Jesus who lived among them in the agrarian culture of Galilee as a destitute radical itinerant. These, I think, did not just disappear, although it is probably true to say that there were never very many of them. Yet, if we remember the parable of the mustard seed, we know very well how "the smallest of seeds" can become

a huge weed infesting the whole garden. We may think of these radicals, of which Jesus had himself been one, in two mutually supporting and informing ways: they were kinds of Hellenistic Cynics and they were kinds of Hebrew prophets. (Cross-culturally speaking, these are tolerably versions of very similar things.)

Their message was *at one and the same time* religious, political, social and economic. These were kingdom of God people not Jesus is Lord people. They focused on the message of Jesus who had been alive rather than meditating on his death for its meaning. In time, perhaps around 20 years later, this would result in the beginnings of a couple of texts very important to the ongoing traditions about Jesus, the Q Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas which, in my conception and especially in their beginnings and early stages of composition, are not Christian texts: they are texts of other followers of Jesus, texts of kingdom people. But before we get to those there is a group of sayings (which John Dominic Crossan, who takes it over from Stephen Patterson, calls the “Common Sayings Tradition”) which gives an insight into these people. This tradition is 37 sayings these later texts (Q and Thomas) will have in common. They are nothing more than that and no one is suggesting they were a text in their own right. They are, instead, a snapshot of the kind of oral stories and sayings being handed around at this time in Galilee about Jesus. We only have access to this tradition by comparing Q and Thomas in their later forms, however, and so in now presenting these sayings information about their later redaction in these texts and their use in one or two other texts will also be noted as documented by Crossan. This will be explained afterwards...

... In that Common Sayings Tradition Q, of course, is a reconstructed source that scholars have discerned from the fact that Matthew and Luke seem to be using the same source

but that that source is not Mark, a source they also have in common. (This explains the fragmentary, reconstructed Q text above. Since it is not extant, it must be hypothesized.) We are lucky here that the sands of Egypt gave up a Coptic version of the Gospel of Thomas with which to compare this hypothesized Q text for, in that comparison, these common sayings are revealed. But what do they reveal? They reveal a very agrarian, kingdom-based set of sayings which have a startling lack of interest about the person of Jesus and none in his death and resurrection. To recap: this Common Sayings Tradition is a set of sayings common to Q and Thomas. Since Q and Thomas are judged independent documents (one does not rely on the other) these sayings must be logically prior to either text being created. These sayings were orally transmitted and never in text form, sayings those in the Galilean post-Jesus community preserved about Jesus and his kingdom message. They give hints of the original Jesus community which Jesus led himself, especially in its radicality and itinerancy. This is the kingdom of God which belongs to the poor, the kingdom in which you should give all your money away to someone from whom you will not get it back. This is the kingdom of destitute radical itinerants wandering the fields and hills of Galilee offering the kingdom of God to any who will accept the challenge. It is not a "believe in Jesus" movement: it is an "enter the kingdom of God" movement.

This story deviates from the normal one that is told of people believing in Jesus. But, in this putative historical reconstruction, that narrative has not yet been invented. Nevertheless, the New Testament gospels that my own story has not yet got to do give up clues that are useful to it. One key clue is that all four New Testament gospels, in their own way, suggest that belief in Jesus, and particularly belief in the meaning of his death and resurrection, was not so uniform as it might seem. Matthew, for example,

plainly states at Matt 28:17 that “some doubted” the resurrection. (Here I must plainly state I think the resurrection narratives of the New Testament are unhistorical fictions. They are made up and made up by people who weren’t there.) John’s gospel has Mary Magdalene going to the tomb looking for a dead body to anoint, hardly the reaction of belief in Jesus, and tells the tale of Thomas who refuses to believe unless his conditions are met. Luke tells a tale in which people walk down the road talking to a risen Jesus they do not recognise and Mark has women running away from the tomb in terror and, self-contradictingly, keeping their mouths shut. All these clues add up to one conclusion in my view: not everyone was interested in the death and supposed resurrection of Jesus. This was an interpretation and a narrative which developed over time and spread later on. It was not a uniform belief either but a local one (most likely to Jerusalem at first).

So there were others who did not believe and probably were not engaged by death and resurrection stories. There were others, likely Galileans who had seen, heard and even known Jesus as part of his radical itinerant community, who persevered with a kingdom message unfocused on Jesus himself. We see their traces in the Common Sayings Tradition and, as that tradition develops, on into Q and Thomas, texts which themselves redact the traditions they receive in two diverging directions over time. Thomas will go in an esoteric, mystical direction and Q will become more apocalyptic. Yet both of these texts, neither explicitly Christian, at least at first, and perhaps not even at all, preserve memories of the radical itinerant Jesus and the community of kingdom people that were around him, a tradition of following Jesus not at all about the status of Jesus, his death or his proposed resurrection, a matter of kingdom not Christ.

So its my suggestion that not everyone who followed Jesus was a Christian. Some, frankly, never became, or ever were, Christians, not if to be a Christian is to worship Jesus as Lord and to hold beliefs about the meaning of his death and resurrection. But, much more than this, it was not a necessary corollary of following Jesus that one had to become a Christian and Jesus did not appear to invent Christianity. In fact, I insist that Jesus and his earliest Galilean followers, some of whom continued doing what they had been doing after his death as before, are wholly explained by an interpretation of Judaism. If Christianity had never been invented Jesus and his community would still make absolute Jewish sense. Christianity, then, is an interpretation of certain later followers of Jesus and not the necessary endgame or purpose of the Jesus Community and Jesus' activity within it. Jesus was not a Christian and neither were a number of his earliest and most original followers. Q, Thomas and the Common Sayings Tradition that precedes them are the evidence.

So back in Galilee we have a Jesus community which becomes a different yet the same kind of post-Jesus community after his demise. Initially they were much the same in terms of belief and practice. But this community did follow Jesus and so they did preserve sayings of and stories about him. It was a tradition focused on his life though and not his death. But these Galileans were not the only post-Jesus community as we have already seen. Down in and around Jerusalem a different way of following Jesus had been gestating, one which came to revere him as Lord and to give significance to his death, even proclaiming his resurrection, an apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus. From this I think it is possible we may speak about two further developing traditions. The first is what Crossan terms a "Common Meal Tradition" which, further down the road, will become the Eucharist, a ritual meal which commemorates Jesus' death and gives him

significance as a sacrifice for sins within a Jewish Christian eschatological scheme. This tradition might also be affected by the Life Tradition too, however, if it turns out that it was habitual of Jesus in his wandering, itinerant ministry to share food with people. This Common Meal Tradition can also be seen as a ritualising of such practice with the significance accorded to it by the Death Tradition.

The second, and more controversial, thing we can talk about is the formation of an early version of some form of passion narrative, some pre-gospel source which gives a rudimentary tale about Jesus' death and his resurrection. This source, so its proponent John Dominic Crossan claims, is the impetus behind all four canonical gospel accounts of these events and the earliest source of such tales. He calls it the "Cross Gospel" and sees its textual remains now in the Gospel of Peter which is a classic 2nd century harmonising text that seeks to bring several accounts together in one document. This text shows evidence of combining all of the canonical gospel accounts in its own text but with a remainder. That remainder is the Cross Gospel, a passion source. It goes without saying that both of these developments, the Common Meal Tradition and the proposed Cross Gospel, are movements in an explicitly Christian direction. Contrast them, if you will, with what it is proposed is going on in Galilee at this time (although we should not be deceived into thinking of this statically or uniformly. Traditions are fluid and develop in diverse and uneven ways).

A further document to mention here, although some would place it nearer the end of the first century, is the Didache, a "community rule" much like that discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Jewish Essenes at Qumran. A community rule is a text concerned with the order of a sectarian group. It lays down how the group shall behave

and gives general statements of beliefs and about the discipline of the community. The Didache, also known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, is a Jewish Christian community rule of just this type. It is not a gospel but is very much concerned with belief and especially practice internal to the group. It mentions prayer, baptism and a Eucharist as well as generalised teaching about “the two ways” that would be well known to a Jewish educated audience. In the form in which it currently exists it seems to be an autonomous text albeit that it is possible there are interpolations from canonical gospels. In terms of form, at least, it is a witness to some first century Jewish Christian community, its beliefs and practices. However, it is hard to tell, given this focus, exactly what the community it applies to really did believe about Jesus although we can say it is clearly a Christian document. Jesus is Lord in this community and his death has meaning. It also evidences wandering itinerants in its text, perhaps early Christian (or simply Jesus following) prophets, and gives rules for interacting with them.

One of the major nodes in the network of post-Jesus traditional relations is the creation of the Gospel of Mark. For Mark, in the first major way, unites multiple traditions in his text. Mark is a gospel which combines life, death and common meal traditions all at the same time, providing a unifying story where before they had been separate and divergent. This, by the way, does not mean that as soon as Mark appeared the other traditions, in their diversity and divergence, simply stopped. Thomas, for example, goes on into a tradition that is very different and Q, as we will soon see, gets swallowed whole by something else. Oral traditions of many kinds still existed, continued and interacted with new, textual ones. What it means is that a new, hybrid tradition was added. It would, of course, prove to be the dominant one in the fullness of time. It is Mark who first provides what we now call a “gospel”, good news, but this is not his invention. “Good

news” was borrowed from Roman culture and such good news was often proclaimed about the Roman emperor. This, in fact, was Mark’s point of attack and of its appeal to citizens in the Roman empire. But Mark is also an attempt to give something of a narrative about Jesus. Q and Thomas had been collections of sayings and they hadn’t been so much about Jesus as about Jesus’ message of the kingdom or Jesus’ wisdom. But Mark was fundamentally about Jesus, an attempt to get a “Jesus narrative” out there and to make Jesus himself, and his significance, the major topic. Mark is an evangelist and Mark the book, which, since Wilhelm Wrede, has been recognised by many as a fabrication of a past, is evangelism for an interpretation of Jesus. So this makes it fundamentally different to Q and Thomas and, read side by side, this isn’t difficult to see. Mark has developed as a result of a Christian direction of travel where Thomas and, so far, Q have not.

But this won’t last for long for after Mark, located by most scholars in the early 70s CE, come more gospels, those of Matthew and Luke in the 80s or 90s. It is hard at this point to give all this burgeoning literary activity precise physical locations and you should not think that Galilee and Jerusalem are the only relevant locations. They are start points but the traditions about Jesus spread, as the New Testament itself records, and places like Antioch, Syria (the Roman province rather than the modern country), Asia Minor and even Greece become centres of literary activity. This, I am bound to say, is largely on the Christian side of the divide in my diagram for the Galilean followers of Jesus and their traditions seem to either recede into a dark well of history, to develop in other, non-Christian ways, or to be subsumed into Christianity itself. This, in fact, is the case with the Q Gospel which becomes used by Matthew and Luke, along with Mark, as two of their major sources (each also have their own material from either other, unknown sources or

their own imaginations). Q, as I have already mentioned, began as a collection of sayings and stories about or of Jesus. But it developed in an apocalyptic direction, one amenable to the already apocalyptic significance of Jesus that had been accorded him by the Jerusalem Death Tradition which came to view Jesus as Risen Lord. This made Q ripe for inclusion in further, expanded gospels on the model that Mark had instigated. Matthew and Luke provided these, each for their own unique communities and with their own emphases.

Therefore, all of the Common Sayings Tradition and, indeed, Q is actually inside the New Testament (as is about half of Thomas actually) but, inside Christian gospels that hybridize the streams of tradition that came before them, they now stand as testimony to something completely different: an apocalyptic martyrology, a biography of God's son and messiah (Christ, which is Greek, means messiah, which is Hebrew). This, literarily speaking, will prove to be the crucial move going forward for it will give a reasonably complete narrative about Jesus and his past as the Christ, in culturally acceptable format, and it will combine strands of tradition that were originally separate and that developed chaotically. But they are interpretations of a past you could not have recorded on video, meaningful fictions based in a very real present. Matthew and Luke, like Mark which they largely follow in sequence, are not the bald facts. They are complex literary-theological presentations, works of artifice and purpose.

Our four Christian gospels are now nearly in place and the fourth, John, probably comes along, at least in first flush, by the last decade of the first century. It seems to be made up of a number of sources as often the rough joins this book seems to contain are very evident. One need only mention its "ending" at John 20:30-31 only to find that, straight

after, another chapter has been subsequently appended to give an example of this. It is conjectured by some that John, the last of the four New Testament gospels to be written, is dependent on the first three, although this is not in a word for word or sequential way that we can observe in the relations of Matthew, Mark and Luke. I am myself broadly sympathetic to this thinking, especially in the case of Johannine dependence on Mark. Yet others have also argued that there is a so-called “signs source”, indicated in my diagram as “Signs”, which also served as a source for John. This text, and it is conjectured to be a text, contained a collection of signs which testifies to Jesus’ personal significance. We can imagine that if this existed it was then a Christian text itself.

John itself is supremely the gospel of theological reflection so we can imagine its writers having other documents to hand upon which they were reflecting or responding to in compiling their own gospel text. The signs source, for example, is now taken into John as an excuse for the book’s numerous extended speeches put on the lips of Jesus, something in complete contradiction to the mode of expression we find on Jesus’ lips in Matthew, Mark and Luke (and Q and Thomas). But we shouldn’t worry too much about that. I don’t conceive that any of the traditions being spoken about here are pure, the uncontaminated Jesus. To create and sustain traditions at all is to contaminate, develop, interpret, imagine and socialize the content. We should not here think in textual, documentary terms so much as fictive, communal, truth-telling ones. Traditions such as these are not about correctly transmitting facts but about carrying forward authentic interpretations. Of course, what should then be regarded as authentic is very much the question at issue.

To finish the description of my diagram we tip over into the second century where we find Acts, the second volume of Luke, and the continuation of the story Luke has been telling which sees the gospel that wasn't originally a gospel at all going from Galilee to Jerusalem in Luke and then from Jerusalem to Rome in Acts. Acts, like the four canonical gospels, is a "tall tale", a fictive hybridization of traditions that attempts to tell a "one-size-fits-all" story of Jesus and Christian origins. Were it not for texts like Q and Thomas we might have been forced to believe it for lack of other options. But, fortunately, other texts do exist (or can be reasonably conjectured) and so we do have the option of disputing Luke's story and seeing things another way.

For traditional, mainstream Christianity Luke-Acts (together with a harmonizing reading of the traditions of Matthew, Mark, John and the letters of Paul) will become the official insider narrative of Christianity and the backdated history of Jesus. It will be read as what happened and how it happened in as far as harmonization makes this possible. Jesus will become Lord from the first, recognised as such at the time he was alive (by those with the requisite faith) and his death and resurrection will become the point of it all, something he openly discussed with his closest followers as his purpose. The Gospel of Peter, already mentioned, will come along later in the second century to engage in even more harmonizing, a popular activity in this century as Tatian's famous "Diatessaron" also shows (this was a harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), to give a passion account that hybridizes numerous canonical and non-canonical traditions. In the end, Christian interpretations of Jesus prevail and the destitute radical itinerant Jesus who led a wandering band of cynic/prophetic kingdom radicals as a means to critique and so reconstitute Israel and Judaism itself is buried in a tomb of Christian texts.

B). Reflections from the Early Twenty First Century

My previous chapter in this book was composed of five texts from roughly the first century after Jesus' crucifixion in about 30 CE. It was there to demonstrate one thing: diversity. Diversity is important for it puts the mainstream narrative of uniformity in question. I believe that narrative should be put in question and for one very good reason: it is false. This, in my view, doesn't stop people believing Jesus is Lord (nor should it) but it does remove the foundation from the traditional story of *why* he is Lord. In other words, if the traditional narrative is false and another is extant then it makes a difference. Do you think conservative Christians and their scholars engage in biblical scholarship for fun? No, they are fighting for their narrative lives and their ability to believe their tall tales unhindered by opponents with other, more convincing or simply different stories to tell. But if "the truth shall set you free" then what is there to worry about? If Jesus is truly Lord then how can he be threatened by a better or different story to explain the past coming out? Is it a case of being wedded to a rhetorical and historical narrative rather than a living faith in, and relationship to, a person, as Christian rhetoric claims? Is there some hypocrisy at work here?

I recall a recent book I wrote, the fourth of four I've written about Jesus and Christian origins. In it I tackled the views and historical approaches of four conservative Christian scholars who each, in their own ways, want to defend a New Testament version of events that, as can be seen in this essay, I am claiming is false. None of those four, somewhat amazingly to me, is really interested in saying how they think the pieces of the puzzle fit together. None provides a narrative, however tentative, of how A goes to B to C, etc. All present a version of the approach that you must believe the whole thing *as it is* or you

must reject it all as false and concede that there is now nothing to be known and no source to rely on. Unsurprisingly, they all choose to trust the New Testament which, in my mind at least, is to choose to accept a narrative just because someone happens to have written it down. If you refuse to justify the narrative before you and refuse to play the game of fitting the historical pieces of the puzzle together then what else can it be? Those scholars, and many others like them, present their approach as some kind of virtue, as if preserving the New Testament's integrity is what the game is about. But it is not about that. *It is about uncovering what this history does not want us to know.* It is about finding the joins that creative Christians have had to fabricate to create their illusions of a past. All histories have these joins for all histories are fabrications. Christianity and its New Testament do not escape this phenomenon for they are also up to the cross around their necks in it.

So I think of the New Testament scholar, Dale Allison. He argues that Jesus' circumstances were all apocalyptic. Jesus had been associated with John the Baptist, an apocalyptic preacher of justice and repentance performing symbolic acts by the Jordan river. The canonical gospels (which Allison can find no way to examine except as a whole and as they are even though he has written books about Q which is a subset of material within two of the four gospels in the New Testament) are also suffused throughout with apocalyptic imagery. The Christian church, which would form and spread after Jesus, was also thoroughly apocalyptic, its major symbol, Jesus' resurrection, being thoroughly apocalyptic within itself as the writings of Paul also amply demonstrate. Allison wants to line up all these ducks in a row and that means making Jesus an apocalyptic figure too, whether risen Lord or extant messiah in Galilee. Allison baldly (and boldly) tells us that years of scholarship have left him unable to determine any trustworthy way to fit the

Christian story together as historical development and so our only remaining choice is to look at the character of the material as a whole and either accept it is basically right and so trustworthy or basically wrong and so useless. In this essay I accept Allison's terms and pronounce the contours of the New Testament, and especially its gospels, a basic fiction. *But* I further refuse Allison's premise that this means we have nothing to go on. Even made up stories can still tell us things that the writers didn't realise they were saying, as any viewer of 70s TV show *Columbo* should know very well.

Yet I also think of another of the four scholars whose work I studied in that previous book, Tom Wright. Wright is almost entirely concerned with telling a biblical, theological-historical story about Jesus. He is soaked in knowledge about these things but it does not seem to have ever occurred to him that this is not enough. Wright reads his bible and ancient Christian and Jewish texts thoroughly and he applies them and their beliefs to Jesus as he sees fit. His task he regards as *making sense of the gospels and the New Testament as they are*. Wright never really says why he is doing this. It is an unexplained but entirely understandable presumption of veracity on his part. Wright, throughout his major book on Jesus from 1996, will often tell his readers exactly what Jesus was thinking as well as every Jew in Roman Palestine as well. Having read the literature, Wright thinks he has mapped out every possible first century Jewish thought in his head. Here, to be apocalyptic in thought is to be like the New Testament about Jesus and his Jewish heritage and to doubt the veracity of any biblical gospel, or the Christian mythology as a whole, is to be a storyteller, a fiction-weaver, someone of nefarious intent out to create novelty from history as, in fact, he would think I am doing now.

This is an astonishing stance to take when you yourself flatly refuse to produce anything but reams and reams of excellently-argued but otherwise wholly apologetic scholarship aimed at buttressing traditional Christianity in a contemporarily intelligent and informed way. Wright very well knows the narrative I have here produced for he spends about 100 pages in his book that I am here referring to casting it dark looks and sarcastic quips. But he doesn't really marshal arguments to dismantle it. He just picks and chooses insults to cast in its direction before choosing to ignore it without ever offering a coherent alternative. Instead, he offers a biblical Jewish story about Jesus as Israel as if that were the only such story that could be told. But it isn't and it is banal and short-sighted to imagine that Jesus could only think as a Jew, in ways Wright himself has determined, but not in any other. The Jesus I conceive of here was entirely Jewish. But that does not entail him thinking of himself as Israel or as the messiah, of speaking about a death he is intending to embrace or a resurrection he will have soon after. Read the Tanakh. There God owns the land of Israel, cares for the poor and the stranger and rules over all.. even when it seems like he doesn't. Simple themes like this are as Jewish as it gets. Jesus plugs into them in his kingdom message. But its not, *and doesn't need to be*, all about him. Wright cannot tell us what Jews *must* think and the Tanakh is full of very broad themes Jesus could, and I think did, exploit that aren't as convoluted as those Wright the bible professor imagines.

But Wright, of course, is only doing what the New Testament itself was shaped to do: trying to give a uniform, universalizing picture of events. Yet scholarship of a certain kind has slowly unpicked this and for those with eyes open such a picture can now no longer be viewed with integrity. Instead, this fabricated uniformity of viewpoint which, fabricated as it was, is strategically situated right back in the teaching of Jesus himself, is

replaced with a diversity of response to Jesus, both during his life and after his death. There was no one way to accept Jesus, if one accepted him at all. Those coming to him were not received as proto-Christians if they accepted his call. The absurd spectre of a Jewish apocalyptic preacher, John the Baptist, being hermeneutically reconstituted as a forerunner of a religion completely different to that he thought he was addressing cannot be allowed to stand. The notion that those who followed Jesus were all Christians who accepted propositions about Jesus' status and purpose in some Jewish become Christian apocalyptic-martyrological scheme must be rejected. If that means saying the New Testament as we have it is false, a fiction of origins, a myth, then so be it.

Christianity as the story in the canonical gospels has been hybridized, retrojected and backdated. It represents the development of views about Jesus some 40-70 years after the life of Jesus rather than the views of Jesus himself - and those intervening decades do make a difference. It creates a history, a set of interlocking founding myths, beginning with Mark as the first gospel, a myth of origins as Burton Mack has claimed and as Wilhelm Wrede suggested over a century ago. We are presented with a history, a collecting together of traditions from diverse sources and that were interested in different things. But it is not *the* history. It is an interpretation of Jesus, a presentation to be accepted and believed in. Meanwhile, in the wider New Testament, the attention given to the writings of Paul, who had a mythical-apocalyptic understanding of Jesus as Christ, a person he didn't know and never met, have grossly over exaggerated his importance. We know from the New Testament itself that Paul was competing in the marketplace of ideas for his views about Jesus and their religious and cultural meaning. He had disputes at least with Peter and James as well as a further named person, Apollos. This Apollos knew things about Jesus too but only of the baptism of John the

Baptist so we are told. Apollos is presented in the New Testament as someone with an imperfect understanding of the nascent faith but also as a rival to Paul. Yet if Apollos' understanding was imperfect how was that of Paul, who seemingly knows so little about Jesus as a living, breathing kingdom person himself, any less so? Plenty of scholars have noted how Paul comes across as almost a visionary mystic at times and I, for one, will never tire of noting his complete lack of acquaintance with Jesus the man. There are plenty of others who could claim a much more authentic acquaintance with Jesus which is perhaps why Paul himself is aggressively defensive in defence of his claimed apostleship. Paul, primarily, is the defender of an apocalyptic interpretation of the idea of Jesus as Christ. What this has to do with Jesus himself is very moot indeed. The Galilean traditions behind Q and Thomas, ones perhaps not just geographically but intellectually closer to Jesus, set them in an entirely different historical context.

But this is not to suggest that Jesus would have endorsed what became the Q Gospel or the Gospel of Thomas either. The consequence of concluding that the canonical gospels (and/or Paul) are wrong is not that some non-canonical gospels are right. My view is that people are responsible for their own interpretations. We have no reason to believe that Jesus would have endorsed Q or Thomas either, much less their further traditional developments along the lines I have indicated here. Jesus, to be blunt, does not ever seem focused on writing texts or compiling authentic accounts about him. Investigating the traditions about him judiciously indicates he was a man of the open air, a man of thought, words and action, rather than a literate man of letters interested in writing texts. This is the authentic Jesus and we model and imitate him when we take up his concerns and care about what he cared about and not when we write ideological or quasi-historical books about him or accounts of him. It is others who decide to write

books, possible in every case to be those he never personally knew. Gospels were not Jesus' concern and in my view neither were any texts which focused on him rather than the kingdom. For this reason any focus which raises him above the community he was a part of and intends to build up is likely not authentic to Jesus. Jesus, if he was anything, was not self-obsessed but kingdom-obsessed and this was about human action and orientation not books lauding him or raising him to the status of a special personage.

Yet why did people write gospels anyway? This is a basic question and in every example we can think of the answer must be the person of Jesus. But this is the privilege of those who are not Jesus rather than Jesus himself. There is a difference between Jesus saying "Remember me and what I am doing" and others deciding that he was memorable and starting to write. Yet a further question is *how* to remember him. Q and Thomas are sayings collections in which Jesus speaks as a voice of wisdom or prophecy or both. The Signs Source, if it existed, was a collection of deeds which pointed to something about Jesus. But the canonical gospels are something else again and significance attaches not just to words or deeds but to Jesus' character and his death too. In the passion narratives, with which all the canonical gospels climax, special meaning is attached to events he undergoes and Jesus becomes an actor in a narrative of world-changing significance far removed from the poor of Galilee among whom Jesus lived as one of them.

Yet even here there is difference. Why, knowing of the existence of Mark and Q, did Matthew and Luke decide to write new gospels anyway? Was there something wrong with Mark and Q? Why, perhaps knowing Matthew, Mark and Luke, was John written nevertheless? It is because traditions, whatever they are, serve purposes. Interpretations

make a difference and steer a different course. That is why this tale I have told is important. There is not in my diagram at the head of this essay just one arrow which moves forward in unchanging uniformity. Instead, it indicates diversity of thought and tradition, diversity of purpose and intention, diversity of understanding and desire. There were always a multiplicity of views about Jesus and this was even the case after Mark brought several together in his myth of origins. It only inspired more, fuller, different versions of the myth. Later, in texts like the Gospel of Peter or the Diatessaron, others would even try to amalgamate them into a yet more uniform yet different story.

So we can witness a set of general directions of travel here over time, extending forward from the initial Jesus Community:

From diversity to uniformity.

From itinerant to settled.

From random to organised.

From charismatic to hierarchical.

From Jesus to Christ.

All this is very interesting but, for me at least, its not the point. The point for me is when you tell a story of Jesus, what story do you tell? Where does that story come from and what work have you done to justify it, ground it, and substantiate it? Is it, perhaps, a harmony of stories that no one textual source gives by itself? In that case this then is your own story about Jesus. Is it a Christian story and, if it is, is that an authentic story about Jesus considering the tale I have told in this essay? What, at the end of the day, *is* a story authentic to Jesus, an authentic interpretation *of* Jesus?

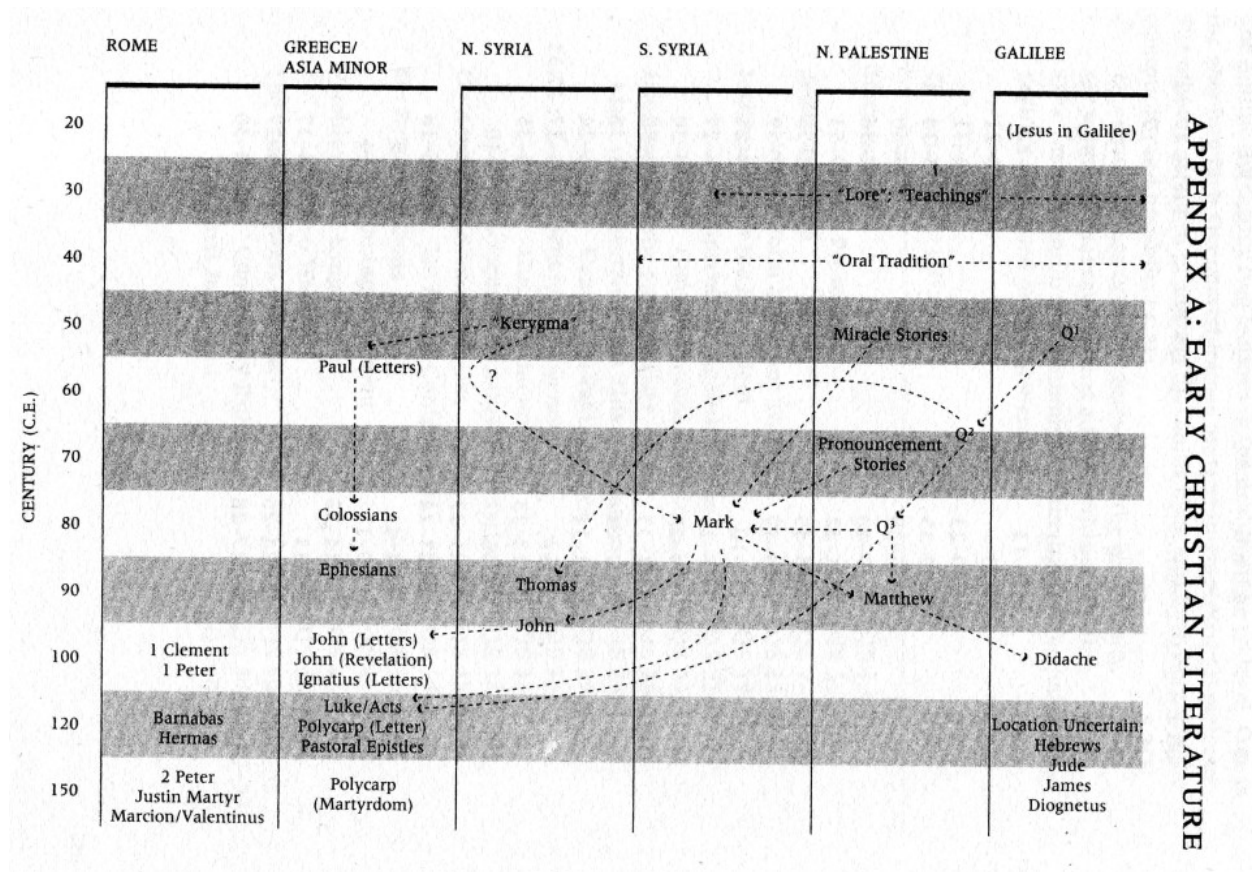
My own answer lies back in those Galilean hills. It is not a story of a Christ I cannot believe in and whose history has, to me at least, been exposed. It is the story of a man consumed with love for God and his fellow Jews and with the faith and stories of his people. He wants God to reign and he wants people to be free of oppressions, not least political and economic ones which are, in his time and place, spiritual and religious ones too. His prayer is not Jesus is Lord but "Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." This man is as Jewish as Jewish can be, part Hebrew prophet, part Cynic sage, in his countercultural radicality and as a man of Hellenistic and Roman Jewish history. He lives in the wild with the few members of his community and he offers things only God should offer. He acts as yeast in the dough and he puts the onus on people to welcome and accept the kingdom that is among them now. God reigns and they should not doubt it. They should open their eyes and their ears.

This Jesus, in my view, is best preserved in the earliest Galilean traditions but, we may be sure, time changes all things and even there, in Q and Thomas and beyond, he is eventually once more reclaimed by the mists of time, now just a distant memory, an interpreted and reinterpreted figure. In life he became crucified, a victim of proselytizing for a kingdom other than the status quo, but in death he was canonised as saviour and Lord. In this sense the death is truly a fitting end for him for he died for his beliefs and his love. But we should not hold him responsible for what others would make of him. Jesus spoke for himself and, for those who discover the interpretations of his sayings and actions, his meaning is clear. Jesus was a man of the earth, a man of the people, a man of compassion. He was not a god. And this is my putative reconstruction of his origins as a character who now, in still divergent forms, crosses history in multiple guises.

You may ask for yourself who he is for you and what he means today and, if you do, you may find that, whoever he is, he can still speak a word about the kingdom even now.

But the question will then be do you *really* want that kingdom to come?

PS If you need a further diagram of early Christian texts in the first century and beyond, this time rather fuller than mine, to further stimulate your thoughts then consider this one from biblical scholar, Burton Mack, from his book *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (1993).



The Archaeology of Q and Thomas: Community, Tradition and History

*The Gospel of Thomas and Q challenge the assumption that the early church was unanimous in making Jesus' death and resurrection the fulcrum of Christian faith. Both documents presuppose that Jesus' significance lay in his words, and in his words alone... The materials which the Gospel of Thomas and Q share must belong to a very early stage of the transmission of Jesus' sayings. All of them fit well in the first composition of the Synoptic Sayings Source. In a few instances, a saying reflects Matthew's rather than Luke's wording; in these instances, there are good reasons to believe that Matthew has preserved the original wording of Q. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas is either dependent upon the earliest version of Q or, more likely, shares with the author of Q one or several very early collections of Jesus' sayings.*⁴⁴⁰

...most, if not all, of the Thomasine-Synoptic parallels represent orally transmitted material rather than material copied from literary sources. The oral residue becomes even more apparent to me when I observe the commonalities across the Synoptic versions - that is across the Triple Tradition material and Quelle material - and compare them with the commonalities between Thomas and the Synoptics. The exact verbal agreement, lengthy sequences of words, and secondary features shared between the Triple Tradition versions and the Quelle versions far exceed anything we find in the Gospel of Thomas. This observation appears to provide support for the traditional view that there is a literary connection between the Synoptic Gospels. But this does not hold true for Thomas which instead displays the strong features of oral transmission. This leads me to think that the Kernel sayings are among our oldest witnesses to the words of Jesus, perhaps even pre-

440 Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, pp. 86, 95.

*dating Quelle (although this has not been established yet and remains only a possibility requiring future investigation).*⁴⁴¹

*The character of Q as a document, and a literary document at that, seems to ill-accord with what we would expect for both the social background and the lifestyle of... itinerants who, if they are not to carry purse or staff or money, seem all the less likely to be carting along a scroll of Q, or commissioning one (with their non-existent money), or composing one (with the pen, ink, and papyrus they carry about in their non-existent luggage).*⁴⁴²

*The Gospel of Thomas has become a prime illustration of... diversity. It can help us see the potential of the Jesus tradition to develop in directions we could scarcely fathom before... The Gospel of Thomas represents an autonomous development of the Jesus tradition that is more or less independent of synoptic tradition.*⁴⁴³

*In retrospect it seems strange that no one thought to question the main storyline that resulted from a merger of the four gospels, the very outline of the "life of Christ" that all Christians had in mind.*⁴⁴⁴

Our real problem with Jesus is not the vast amount of detail we will never know, for most of that we do not need to know. The problem is that we have ascribed to him a different gospel from what he himself envisaged! We have put him on a pedestal and worshiped him, rather than walking in his footsteps. Put somewhat differently: we must work our way back

441 April DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, p. 23.

442 William Arnal, "The Trouble with Q" in *The Galilee and Christian Origins* (Foundations and Facets Forum, Third Series 2,1, Spring 2013), p. 44.

443 Stephen J. Patterson, "A View from Across The Euphrates" in *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, pp. 9. 11.

444 Burton Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, pp. 17-18.

*through the church's own familiar gospel and its domestication of the gospel of Jesus. Only then do we strike upon what he really had to say, which was a brittle, upsetting, comforting, challenging gospel - one the present book seeks to lay bare.*⁴⁴⁵

*The First Stratum contains important information about the early Jesus followers of a wide variety: those who collected sayings, others who were oriented toward the miracles, still others fascinated by the apocalypse, and others in the Pauline community who were living out a new form of universal Judaism. These communities in various ways related to a living Jesus, one speaking in the sayings, one immediately available in the miraculous manner of Moses' deeds to save the people of God, one present in the meal, one manifest in the community that formed his Body and that transgressed boundaries of gender, race, and class. This stratum, in short, is characterized by a wide diversity of forms and understandings of Jesus, those identified with him, and manners of living out the diversity in community.*⁴⁴⁶

This essay has begun with seven scholarly quotations, a magnificent seven, if you like. They are, perhaps to unschooled readers, jigsaw puzzle pieces that I aim to fit together, with several others, to build the picture that this essay is intended to communicate. The point of this essay is to argue for, or maybe merely just suggest, several controversial things about some early followers of Jesus and their communities. These include that there were non-Christian followers of Jesus and that these non-Christian followers were constitutive in preserving sayings of Jesus which didn't amount to making him special, even unique, in the history of Judaism, much less the founder of a completely different, offshoot religion. They also include that Jesus was not, was never, a Christian and that it

445 James M. Robinson, *The Gospel of Jesus: A Historical Search for the Original Good News*, p. 2.

446 Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, p. 17.

is insane to think that any talk about Jesus in any biblical or pre-biblical tradition is automatically “Christology”, properly so called. They further include that neither Q nor the Gospel of Thomas are straightforward handbooks to a more “historical” Jesus for these documents, like any other ancient gospels, are not primarily evidence for a historical individual but, rather, for the community preserving such traditions instead. So you can see that I have several points to make here and, to me at least, its not entirely clear that we will be any nearer to Jesus at the end. But perhaps we will have clarified a few pertinent issues. I can only hope so.

In this essay I will primarily focus on three collections of sayings. All of these collections will be scholarly reconstructions, conjectures (at least one of which never made it to being a text at all), and in using them I suggest not that I simply and naively agree with those conjectures but only that I am open to them as avenues of study that are worthy of further thought. Nearly all research into Jesus and Christian origins is a matter of a reconstructive “what if?” and so I would argue that as “what ifs” these particular conjectures have things to recommend them which is why I use them here. These collections are Burton Mack’s reconstruction of Q1, a putative first collection of Q Gospel sayings to which later sayings were added to become the Q Gospel as a whole conjectured today, April DeConick’s conjecture of a “Kernel Gospel of Thomas” in a 2006 book in which she gave a commentary on the gospel as a whole, and the Common Sayings Tradition from work begun by Stephen Patterson but taken up and developed later in a 1998 book by John Dominic Crossan (who gave the sayings this name). The Common Sayings Tradition is regarded as a complex of 37 sayings that Q and Thomas have in common which, if you believe in the essential independence of Q and Thomas, results in the logical conclusion that these sayings are logically prior to these texts.

In looking at these three collections of sayings, and in taking the historical conjectures about them seriously, it will be necessary to ask after the character of these sayings and to examine the content for meaning. It is, of course, an assumption that with these collections of sayings we go back to perhaps as early a period after the death of Jesus as we have evidence for. I would consider that we are here talking about the period 30-50 CE, several decades before any canonical gospel is compiled (perhaps from 70-100 CE) and also before any datable correspondence of Paul (50s CE). But what I do not assume is that what will be revealed as the contents of these collections are the only things any one preserved about Jesus or that they are, necessarily, any more or less authentic in regard to him. Such judgments may become necessary but, in line with a previous essay in this book, it is not my process to believe that gospel A is good and gospel B is bad. Neither are we playing off canonical books against non-canonical ones. Each is evidence for its own community and their remembrances of their traditions and each has its own value in this respect.

That said, it is my belief that historical research opens up a breach between the later Christian myth of Jesus Christ, dying and rising apocalyptic Lord and martyr of faith, and the strands of tradition evident in Q1, T1 (Kernel Thomas) and the CST (Common Sayings Tradition). The CST, as already outlined, is 37 complexes of sayings common to Q and Thomas as a whole. Whilst some examples of this tradition appear in putative secondary layers of these respective documents, it is worth noting that only two of these 37 complexes do not appear in either Mack's Q1 or DeConick's T1 at all. Thus, as a general principle, and across the work of scholars working independently to their own research programs, these sayings appear early and stand as a witness to early remembrances of Jesus, at least for somebody. This, please note, does not mean they definitively come

from Jesus. As Dale Allison showed in his 1998 book, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, it is basically impossible to screen out sayings carried along that are attributed to Jesus but that are not from him and there are, and never will be, criteria for doing so. So all we can do in examining early collections of sayings is to note what it is they are saying and to regard them as evidence for the community doing the remembering and for the tradition they preserve in such remembrance. It is for later analysis to determine what they remember and its likely authenticity to a figure they claim to remember by their remembering. This is to formally distinguish a tradition's current meaning from its putative historical referents.

What I will do in the remainder of this chapter, then, is discuss these three collections of material with some appropriate scholarly comment to go along with them. That comment will act not as fixed conclusions about the material it imagines to describe but will function, instead, as a guide or set of outline proposals to begin a conversation about what this might tell us about those who preserved the earliest sayings collections of Jesus. And those preserved in them.

The Common Sayings Tradition

The Common Sayings Tradition (CST) is 37 complexes of sayings based on sayings common to the Q Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas... It will be seen that 21 of these complexes have material Mack *and* DeConick allot to their T1 and Q1 sources (56.7%). Two are allotted by neither, those being the second and twenty sixth complexes, but here Crossan, who takes his own view, has all the Thomas texts in these complexes in his version of T1 but the Q text that goes with it is not in Q1. The rest appear in T1 or Q1

and usually in DeConick's T1 rather than Mack's Q1. Six of the complexes were coloured entirely black by the Jesus Seminar which means that 31 of 37 were some variation from 'unlikely' to 'most likely' words of Jesus in their judgment.

But this only tells us a statistical story. We, as historians of Jesus and those who remembered and passed on sayings about and, putatively, of him, must seek to endeavour to understand how and why sayings were passed on as they seem to be. In this, the content of this material must be our biggest help. Just what, and who, are such sayings remembering? Here I focus not on the transmission of the sayings, something more appropriate to the development of Q and Thomas below, but to what these complexes of sayings are about. What Jesus is revealed in them, what interests does he have?

The primary answer here from the 37 complexes of the Common Sayings Tradition must be that the interest of Jesus was focused on the kingdom of God. We find this referenced in complexes 2, 5, 8, 20, 22, 27, 36 and 37 directly and other, further complexes of sayings would quite easily slide into such a context and make sense. A good example here would be various ethical instructions Jesus gives which can be seen as ethics of this kingdom. In these complexes generally the kingdom is regarded as present, it is a matter of current missionary activity, it is like a mustard seed or, alternatively, like yeast working through a batch of dough or like a shepherd seeking a lost sheep, it can be pictured as a feast to which all, good and bad alike, are invited, it belongs to the "poor" (better rendered "destitute" as Crossan would have it) and the least in the kingdom is regarded as "greater than John (the Baptist) - and we can imagine that John was not thought of as an anonymous nobody.

This is already quite a list of accolades even from relatively few direct mentions in the CST. If we add in and coordinate Jesus' ethical sayings from the CST within such a framework we find a place where the golden rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) is in force, where you don't criticise others before sorting your own problems out, where people are told to choose who their master is for people can surely not serve two, where persecution and hunger bring blessing, where followers are exhorted to seek heavenly treasure before earthly riches and where people should give without expecting anything back. Add to this Jesus' saying about relying on the gifts of God through nature as one who looks after the less important birds and flowers and, taken together, this is a strong, consistent and coherent set of sayings which already suggest concrete ideas about Jesus and the content of his sayings. What they suggest to me, at least, is that this is not a random collection of thoughts but that if they came from one person that person had a definite idea about what this kingdom was like and how you should behave within it.

That person, of course, would be argued to be Jesus himself. But what can we say about this Jesus and his presentation in these sayings? First, we can say that they are not about him. Jesus' focus is the kingdom not himself. This is an example of just one fundamental disparity between those who study the historical Jesus for faith reasons and those who don't. But it is also a distinction between some kinds of ancient texts, such as Q and Thomas, and others which go with making something more of Jesus than the CST does here, others such as Paul's letters or the canonical gospels. Put simply, Jesus here in these sayings in the CST is nothing more than a sage. Jesus is here not any kind of authoritative future apocalyptic figure. He is not here 'the Christ' or a messiah (both the same thing anyway). He isn't in the CST a saviour. He hasn't been sent by God and he isn't

a sacrifice for anything. There is no inkling here that he, in his own person, has any special role to play in world events or chronology. Jesus in these sayings *has not been Christianised*. There are hints that in Q Jesus is regarded in slightly more Semitic fashion than in Thomas (some Q sayings here mention the son of man as a circumlocution for Jesus) but nothing here shouts out “Jesus the Christian”. Not only is Jesus in his presentation speaking of Jewish things to Jews but its also not being taken in explicitly Christian directions in these sayings either even with all the later redaction they have been subjected to. These are the sayings of Jesus the respected wise man, Jesus the sage, and this should be noted.

Addressing the social location and situation of these sayings something that jumps out when we take them in the round and appraise them thematically is that they describe a situation of social disruption that is being spoken of by Jesus. He exhorts seeking and finding, gives instructions for wandering the territory in a context where warm welcome might not be assured, his message is said to be like fire or a sword and to split families, it seems to be contrary to the teaching of the Pharisees who are seen as blockages to the message and the people simultaneously, it is a matter of hating father and mother, it can be compared to carrying a cross. At the same time Jesus speaks of the harvest boss needing workers and of people having nowhere to lay their heads. Add in the veneration of the poor, persecuted and hungry and the ethical exhortation to give without getting back and we see that Jesus is not any preacher of get rich quick schemes and he is offering no one an easy life in a comfortable kingdom. In earthly terms, Jesus seems to offer nothing but poverty and destitution and the necessity of having to leave house and home and family - all for the sake of this kingdom of God which can be spoken of as heavenly riches. But it just might cost you every morsel of anything your earthly life had

afforded you in order to get it. We might now reappraise the posture of the 'rich man' of Mark 10 who, being told by Jesus to sell everything and follow him, went away unhappy for he was very rich. Here in these 37 complexes of the CST we might very well be able to see why. The kingdom Jesus the sage spoke of was one which would turn lives upside down.

But besides being a matter of some social disruption this kingdom was also one with a personal focus and that required individual people to address themselves and who they were. Jesus' exhortation to seek and find was personally addressed as much as it was communally addressed as was his warning that everything hidden would be exposed. The golden rule, too, clearly has personal application as does Jesus' explanation that the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart for you do not get figs from thorns. Here also would apply Jesus' saying that those with much will get more and those without will even get the little they have taken from them as well as his warning that two will be reclining, one will be taken and one left behind. The focus here is on the individual and on them taking seriously the kingdom of God about which he speaks and its consequences. It is not simply a matter dealt with at communal level by a change of direction but is something which can and should be responded to at a personal level as well. We might also see this too in the parable of the feast where people are individually addressed but make their excuses before the doors are opened wide and the mass of people are invited inasmuch as they will personally respond to the invitation. As Jesus expresses this in the final complex of the CST, God is imagined as a shepherd who seeks out every individual sheep who is lost to make up the flock.

This focus is important and interesting too because it alludes to a sense of mission lifestyle which seems to flow throughout the CST as a whole. Taken together, the complexes seem very active in their orientation with their seeking and sowing seed and missionising and being prepared for thieves and putting lamps on stands and carrying crosses and feasting and giving to those who won't give anything back. Primarily, I think, this is indicative of the fact that this kingdom Jesus speaks of is not a matter of a private belief or set of beliefs. Its not something you think about in a moment of spare time as a break from your life or form as an ideology. Instead, it is your life, it consumes you whole, it is your lifestyle. To live in this kingdom is to act out the kingdom and live its ethics and that will be as something seen not something hidden. It is public. This kingdom is not, for the Jesus of the CST, a private matter. It is a life publicly lived where the change and the priorities are obvious. In living this kingdom life you reveal what is within on the outside as an outflow of the inside. This is not imagined to be easy and may likely have induced anxiety, as Jesus' saying about not worrying in the 15th complex of the CST shows, but it is the requirement nevertheless. To live this life is to advertise this life and to offer it to others as they will respond to it. It reminds me strongly of the Greek Cynics who would have been easily recognizable around the Hellenistic societies of the age. The kingdom of God, we may say, in these sayings of Jesus the sage, has come near and can be seen.

The Kernel Gospel of Thomas According to April DeConick (T1)

Such was a brief appraisal of the CST as a whole in a thematic way. But now we turn to April DeConick's scholarship and her construction of a formative layer of the Gospel of Thomas, something she refers to as the 'Kernel Gospel of Thomas.'... The first thing to

say is that all of the material here in DeConick's Thomas which has any Q parallel is also in the CST and her Kernel Gospel, something she regards as a boost to her own judgment of its early dating. However, this material in general should be dealt with on its own terms in the context of a prospective and, perhaps, speculative construction in regard to how we imagine the Gospel of Thomas came to be.

DeConick herself regards the provenance of this gospel as Palestinian in the first instance (she names Jerusalem specifically here) and her researches lead her to speculate that this kernel may originally have been written in Aramaic (which would differentiate it from Q which has been argued to have been in Greek from the first). She further posits, in a way that would take note of GTh 12, which is not in her kernel of Thomas, that the community behind the text moved to the province of Syria before about 60 CE when James, the head of the Jerusalem church to which GTh 12 refers, was still alive. This allows her to further speculate on Syriac influence to the text that has come down to us as well as the Greek and Coptic copies which we actually have extant. DeConick conceives that her T1 kernel of Thomas would have been extant by 50 CE and that, as a collection of sayings, it may even be older than Q1 to which I will address myself below. (She mentions this several times as a speculation but argues that it requires further research to demonstrate.) This kernel, once in Syria itself, was then subject to several accretions over the following decades, something DeConick lays out in more detail in her studies. For my purposes here, however, I will eventually focus on her kernel T1 version of Thomas as a witness to one putative collection of Jesus Sayings from the earliest period after his crucifixion.

First, however, we must ask after the nature of this construction which DeConick herself has broadly labelled “eschatological”. Here the descriptors ‘Gnostic’ and ‘Gnosticism’ should not be said to apply, as they are even today still generally said to of Thomas as a whole because, as DeConick makes plain in her book, they are “misnomers, that is, they are not so much descriptors of historical realities as they are modern typological constructs.” Such a description of Thomas as a whole is misleading, not least then, because DeConick considers that such a phenomenon did not even exist in genuine history and is a rhetorical simplification of a picture that is much more nuanced in reality. Materials formerly referred to as ‘Gnostic’ could, in fact, be Sethian, Valentinian, Hermetic, etc., which are not all the same thing. There was, says DeConick, no umbrella religion of ‘Gnosticism’ into which these and others might fit. And that is even if we regarded her construction of T1 to be this kind of material which, on first glance, seems far from the case anyway. It is enough to say that, from April DeConick’s perspective, if certain types of scholarship wish to plough on with so called ‘Gnostic’ interpretation of Thomas then they are simply devoid of history and stuck in their own fantasy worlds of the past for whatever rhetorical or ideological purposes they have in doing so.

DeConick herself sites Thomas as a whole in “early Syrian religiosity” and she refers us to her comprehensive monograph *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth* from 2005 which is a sister volume to the commentary I use as my major source for this section of my essay. Here the specific character of such Syrian religiosity is emphasised, this being, in the words of Quispel, about “faith as a way of life” which is contrasted with a legalistic Roman emphasis and an ontological Greek emphasis. DeConick’s point here seems to be that Syrian belief was characteristically different from that in other places, a point that Stephen Patterson has also made in his

writing about Thomas. In his work, for example, Patterson points out that the Syrian city of Edessa, which is where he locates a final form of Thomas as coming from, was not in the Roman empire. Any believers in Jesus there, then, were not subject to any persecutions such as may have been the case within the empire and which we know of from the New Testament. This lack of persecution automatically seems to make a suffering Jesus who is killed but overcomes anyway (much as several Jesus believers in other, more Roman places may have experienced for themselves) a much less relevant interest to such a location.

So this is just one concrete difference of context which may affect and shape the expression of faith in a different geographical place. In this case we should also note that this location is not that of the Hellenistic metropolises of which we are familiar from Paul. Neither is it the Galilean villages associated with Q nor some Palestinian city. In short, DeConick makes the point that *where* a book is made affects *how* a book is made. *And what might be in it because of that.* This is why, for example, DeConick will argue that the cross, or any theology based upon it, is not mentioned in Thomas: it was not needed where it was made. But this, to our historically conditioned eyes and ears, already makes it seem strange because, from the point of view of the New Testament, it is simply an outlier.

The point to grasp, however, is that this, in itself, says nothing at all about the historicity of other presentations. We may now, in the twenty first century, be simply unable to imagine a Jesus without a crucifixion and resurrection. But that says nothing about what people much nearer to the time in other locations could have thought or tell us what they *must* find important about Jesus. The only reasonable conclusion is that a 'one size

fits all' conception of beliefs in Jesus, uniformly across all expressions of it, is false, that it *doesn't have to be* 'Christian' and *doesn't have to be* something like Paul and the canonical gospels will have us believe. Scholarship has now for several decades been telling us that such a uniformity wasn't so if we had ears to hear. So, too many scholars, according to DeConick, have taken the side of 'orthodoxy', as prescribed by the New Testament (which is a presentation more suited to Roman and Greek interests), and, in the process, declared other forms of belief and its expression, and regardless of historicity, deviant and so unimportant.

Here the imagined writer of Thomas becomes important as a background to this text when fitted within a context of early Syrian theology. It is worth quoting DeConick at length on this:

"As far as early Syrian theology is concerned, here the East does not meet the West either. In the early Syrian literature, the human being regains Paradise lost through his or her own effort of righteous living as revealed by Jesus, not through some act of atonement on Jesus' part. Over and over again through story after story, the Christian is taught that he or she must become as self-controlled as possible, particularly concentrating on overcoming desire and passions that lurk in the soul. He or she is taught through discourse and example that marriage should be abandoned in order to achieve the prelapsarian condition of 'singleness'. When this is done, gender differences are abolished and the believer can be united with his or her divine double in the 'bridal chamber'. This divine double, the person's new spouse, is in fact Jesus himself. In the literature, it is Judas Thomas (Judas

the Twin) who becomes the metaphor for all believers since Jesus is described as his very own divine Twin."

Here this is not so much heterodox, by some imagined New Testament standard, as simply a different way of life. The writer of the Gospel of Thomas here is imagined not to be 'Thomas', which means 'the Twin', but Judas the Twin. The twin of who? The twin of Jesus himself as, it seems, was believed in Syrian Christianity and as even the New Testament itself seems not to make impossible with Jesus as the brother of "James and Joses and Judas and Simon" in Mark 6:3. Was Judas there Jesus' twin? An intriguing thought and one seemingly held to by some in genuine history. All this, in any case, is some brief historical context for the form of belief described in Thomas as a whole and a putative geographical location for its later formation.

The point DeConick is making is that we should not act as if beliefs about Jesus were uniform from place to place and neither should we act as if the story that became the dominant one was, thereby, the only one or the historical one or that it was naively and innocently created by people simply interested in preserving the singular truth. On the contrary, people remembered of Jesus what was important to them as the people they were in their communities. To Paul that might be the apocalyptic significance of a death and resurrection. Yet we would be fools to imagine that was the same anywhere and everywhere else or that such belief was the one and only that had a concern for the history and reality of Jesus.

DeConick considers that her 'Kernel Gospel' refers back to an historical "speech book from Jerusalem" that recorded sayings of Jesus (for details on that refer back especially

to chapter 3 of her 2005 book). She states that this kernel “has affinities with Quelle” (the Q Gospel). It is here she notes that every saying in Thomas with a Q parallel also turns up in her Kernel Gospel. She calls this “independent confirmation” that her “very strict methodology” was able to distinguish between earlier and later material. Her configuration of the kernel material is that it was used in oral performance where a speaker ‘stood in for Jesus’ using this material. DeConick goes very hard on the notion that although Thomas is a book it was composed in an oral culture and the normal and regular means of passing on sayings of Jesus would have been *oral*. Orality, in distinction to literacy, is not a matter of precise word for word copying. This, as just one phenomenon, is why it is *very easy* to imagine several differing forms of the sayings and parables of Jesus circulating at the same time. Thus, we should not always or even predominantly imagine the relationships between sayings in one text and another are a matter of literary copying. Much more likely is that they are products of an oral *Sitz im Leben*. In addition, we should not imagine that Jesus only ever said his sayings and parables once. It is, to the contrary, very likely that if he said them once, he said them several times over and in each case in a slightly different way and with differing contexts. As to the contents of the kernel here, DeConick states that

“All five speeches were organized around eschatological themes, showcasing the urgency of the times, the premises of discipleship, and the need for exclusive commitment to Jesus. The Christology in the Kernel sayings is very old, pre-dating even Quelle. In the Kernel, Jesus is God's Prophet who exclusively speaks God's truth. He also is understood to have been exalted to the status of a great Angel whose main role is that of the Judge, casting fire

upon the earth. These descriptors are comparable to those commonly associated with early Christian Judaism from Jerusalem."

To this kernel DeConick, it must be said not to universal scholarly approval, conceives of later accretions added in a Syrian location. Yet the focus of the sayings in the kernel was changed as other sayings were accrued. These sayings:

"accrued in response to Gentile interests that eventually came to dominate the community, a leadership crisis, the death of the eyewitnesses, and the development of Christology. But the main experience which led to the reconfiguration of the Gospel was the fact that the community's original eschatological expectations had been discontinued by its contemporary experience of the Non-Event. When the Kingdom did not come, rather than discarding their Gospel and closing the door of their church, the Thomasine Christians responded by reinterpreting Jesus' sayings."

I have two immediate problems with this. The first, not at all guided by my thoughts about the New Testament or canonical gospels, is why are these people being referred to as "Christians"? What about their belief makes them "Christian" specifically? Veneration of Jesus or his sayings? That would be a strange definition indeed. What is so special about the descriptor 'Christian' that it must be claimed of those behind Thomas? It seems a scholarly fixation, not least of DeConick here. That they are interested in Jesus and collect and preserve his sayings may be granted but, to be blunt, I do the same thing yet in no way consider myself, or anyone doing similar, to necessarily be a 'Christian'. In my view far too little precision is being used in the deployment of this term

and too much ideology is evident in its use as well. I would myself suggest that there is nothing special about the designation 'Christian', a term that far too few scholars actually detail with any great focus, and that there is nothing wrong with Jesus people, such, I suggest, as those behind Thomas and Q, who we might want to describe in some other way instead. Jesus himself was absolutely not a Christian; so why should we worry if others weren't either?

The second problem goes to the heart of what Deconick's collections of kernel sayings are about and particularly her description of them as "eschatological", a slippery and variously deployed term as I have had cause to remark in previous books of my own. So, Deconick claims it is true that:

"They believed that they had misunderstood previously Jesus' intent, that they had applied the wrong hermeneutics to his sayings. So they aligned their old traditions with their present experience by shifting their theology to the mystical and creating a new hermeneutic through which the old traditions could be reinterpreted. This response is visible in the way in which they reformed their old Gospel. Initially between 60 and 100 CE, they added question and answer units and dialogues that addressed the subject directly. New sayings and interpretative clauses accrued, logia that worked to instruct the Christian in the new theology and guide him or her hermeneutically through the Gospel."

But we should ask what the nature of this, DeConick argues perhaps even earlier than Q, eschatology consisted of. We can see, reading the gospel as a whole as we have it now in its 'final form', that it continued to move away from any imagined "eschatological" beginning and went through an ascetical phase into a much more mystical, esoteric final

form. This is not claimed to have come from Jesus as all alike agree. Yet it is precisely at issue here what hermeneutic is at use in this kernel text.

April DeConick's table setting out her scheme for the creation of Thomas

Kernel Gospel, 30–50 CE					
2	21.10	38.1	61.1	74	96.1–2
4.2–3	21.11	39	62.1	76	96.3
5	23.1	40	62.2	78	97
6.2–3	24.2	41	63.1–3	79	98
8	24.3	42	63.4	81	99
9	25	44.2–3	64.1–11	82	100.1–3
10	26	45	65.1–7	86	102
11.1	30	46.1–2a, c	65.8	89	103
14.4	31	47	66	90	104
15	32	48	68.1	91.2	107
16.1–3	33	54	69.2	92	109
17	34	55	71	93	111.1
20.2–4	35	57	72	94	
21.5	36	58	73	95	
Accretions, 50–60 CE					
Relocation and Leadership Crisis					
12					
68.2					
Accretions, 60–100 CE					
Accommodation to Gentiles and Early Eschatological Crisis (with shift to mystical dimension of apocalyptic thought)					
3.1–3	18	37	51	60	88
6.1	20.1	38.2	52	64.12	91.1
14.1–3	24.1	43	53	69.1	113
14.5	27.2	50	59	70	
Accretions, 80–120 CE					
Death of Eyewitnesses, Christological Developments and Continued Eschatological Crisis (with incorporation of encratic and hermetic traditions)					
Incipit	11.2–4	23.2	56	84	108
1	13	27.1	61.2–5	85	110
3.4–5	16.4	28	67	87	111.2
4.1	19	29	75	100.4	111.3
4.4	21.1–4	44.1	77	101	112
6.4–5	21.6–9	46.2b	80	105	114
7	22	49	83	106	

To this end, I would now run through the details of DeConick's T1 kernel material myself to dissect and characterise the content and to ask who this material is remembering and what it is remembering them as saying. Here we should remember, especially, DeConick's strong suggestion that "across the Kernel sayings... an Aramaic substratum predominates." This, she finds, is not so with the sayings denominated later accretions which, in her analysis, skew towards a Syriac substratum. Hence, this motivates her conclusion that a Palestinian Kernel has been further honed, shaped and contextualised by Syrian accretions. The context for the writing down of this Kernel, we should further remember is, for DeConick, that "When traditions were written down, the texts were used as storage sites and memory aids for the continued oral performance of the traditions."

It can certainly be said, when we look at the traditions of DeConick's Kernel Gospel, that they have an eschatological flavour. There are certain agrarian metaphors, particularly of harvest, as well as mentions of "fire", which sound a clear eschatological, although not apocalyptic, tone. It is not really envisaged here that the skies will melt and divine armies will charge through the hills and across the plains casting the evil ones into an abyss. Instead, I would typify this eschatology as that which is evident because of "the kingdom of the Father" which is mentioned in DeConick's T1 several times over and which acts as an ideological context for the rest. This kingdom itself is in some sense eschatological simply by its appearance and so these sayings and speeches, if speeches they be, must have an eschatological flavour too. There are several sayings about what followers, perhaps better termed 'seekers' in the context of T1, should be doing now yet there can still be mention of some terminal point dependent on present actions. "Jesus said, 'Two people will rest on a couch. One will die. One will live'" from GTh 61 is just such an

example. Eschatology implies decision and difference; eschatological harvest imagery implies a distinguishing between produce of worth which is kept and that which faces another fate such as in GTh 40. T1, then, suggests the kingdom as an eschatological time period with all that might imply. Here the position of Jesus is interesting. In GTh 23 he is the one who selects “one from a thousand and two from ten thousand” and in GTh 10 he is in the role of casting fire upon the world. In GTh 31 he is the prophet his own home rejects. In GTh 17, 38 and 62 he has words of wisdom others do not have. Jesus here seems to have an eschatological, yet not at all messianic, sacrificial or atoning, role in the eschatological drama he announces and shares his wisdom about. It suggests an eschatological purpose to the message of Jesus in T1 without at all putting to one side the notion of Jesus as sage.

Jesus uses distinctive forms of speech in T1, primarily parables, which I want to focus on for a moment now, but also beatitudes. I count thirteen parables in DeConick’s *Kernel Gospel*, eight of which mention “kingdom” specifically. “Kingdom of the Father” is here a favoured designation. Of these kingdom parables we are told that the kingdom is like a mustard seed, like a prized pearl that is found, like yeast in some dough, like a woman carrying a jar which breaks, trailing all the contents behind her unknown, like a man who, wishing to kill someone, practiced so he could complete the deed, like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and like treasure buried, unknown, in a field which is then found. Further, complimentary parables include the “human being” (the referent is unclear) who becomes a wise fisherman by keeping the big fish and throwing the little ones back, the sower who sows seed knowing it will land on differing types of ground, the rich man who makes big plans but dies that very same night, the feast which the invited guests make excuses not to attend and so forfeit their places for the people the

servant then finds “on the streets” and the tenant farmers who attack the land owner’s servants and even his son in order to avoid their responsibilities over land that isn’t theirs. As such, none of these parables avoids the context of an eschatological kingdom and all fit well within it. If T1 be a clue to the speech of Jesus, parables would seem to be a feature and an eschatological kingdom would seem to be a likely subject of that same speech.

Yet there is more than even this to Jesus’ eschatological kingdom message in DeConick’s T1. We also have a new kind of kingdom family (GTh 99), a suggestion that now is kingdom time but the people Jesus addresses cannot discern it (GTh 91), Jesus is linked to the kingdom and the image of fire in GTh 82, there is a plea for harvest workers in GTh 73, a grapevine “planted apart from the Father’s” seems due for destruction in GTh 40, sayings in GTh 32, 33 and 24:3 talk about being seen in plain sight or things that cannot be hidden, the suggestion being that there must be something here to see, GTh 21:10 is yet another image of the harvest and in GTh 10 Jesus is the eschatological fire starter. When I return to my mention of beatitudes as archetypal Jesus speech in T1 in addition to this we see that in this Kernel Gospel Jesus blesses the poor (GTh 54), the person who has suffered (GTh 58), the hated and persecuted (GTh 68), the hungry (GTh 69), those who hear the word of the Father and keep it (GTh 79) and the one who knows where the thieves will enter and so prepares for it (GTh 103). These should be seen as eschatological kingdom blessings in the kingdom of the Father as well as constitutive of the remembrances these sayings carry of a Jesus who is said to utter them and so to be interested in just such a kingdom.

Here an interesting feature of these T1 sayings is what sorts of people are mentioned and envisaged, who is criticised and who is blessed. There is no getting around the fact that this seems to take place on an economic basis. The rich, when mentioned, are not praised and being rich itself is the opposite of the ideal here. Instead, the texts here speak of an eschatological reversal of fortune (GTh 4), hearers are told not to be anxious for basic, daily needs (GTh 36), they are told to be passersby (GTh 42, i.e. itinerants who don't outstay a welcome but therefore also those dependent on the land and others, compare GTh 14:4), to "become little" (i.e. humble, GTh 46), the poor are directly and explicitly said to be those to whom the kingdom belongs (GTh 54), "hating" your closest family members is put up as a test of discipleship which suggests parting from your family which, in 1st century Palestinian society, was the cornerstone of making a living as a family unit (GTh 55), the rich fool makes plans for his wealthy future but then dies having focused on the wrong kind of security (GTh 63), the hungry are also blessed (GTh 69), in a saying which in the canonical gospels is applied to John the Baptist, here in Thomas the same saying is used to denigrate "kings and prominent men in soft (i.e. expensive) clothes" (GTh 78), human beings in general are said to have nowhere to lay their heads (GTh 86) and Jesus expressly advises people that "if you have money... give it to someone from whom you will not get it back", possibly the starkest expression in gospel literature of the idea that money is to be disposed of in a way that would leave those so doing with nothing (GTh 95). Jesus is not in these sayings on any kind of funding drive nor in the business of preaching the kingdom of earthly wealth and pleasured comfort. This is a kingdom of poverty likely made up by those who are actually destitute themselves, who rely on nature and others for survival, who are dislocated from traditional family unit and economic society and who are expected to accept if not welcome that due to the divine blessedness that comes with it.

What then of the ethics of this eschatological kingdom that I have been setting out from DeConick's Kernel Gospel? We find here that those involved are to be seekers (GTh 2, 92 + 94), that a reversal of fortune is involved (GTh 4), that people should not lie and should not do what they would hate to be done to them (GTh 6), that this kingdom involves travelling, eating what is served and healing those they meet (GTh 14:4, that is, *if* they take you in), keeping watch in these eschatological times (GTh 21:5 + 103) and having ears to hear (GTh 21:11, 24:2) is encouraged, as is loving your brother (GTh 25), not criticising others before correcting yourself (GTh 26), not being anxious for daily needs (GTh 36), acting with prudence (GTh 39), an ethic of itinerancy (GTh 42), not blaspheming the holy spirit's efficacy (GTh 44), having humility (GTh 46), making peace (GTh 48), being prepared to go against the closest family ties (GTh 55), giving up power (GTh 81), giving your money away (to someone from whom you won't get it back! GTh 95) and paying taxes to Rome if they are due whilst also giving to God what is God's as well (GTh 100) are also encouraged. This, we may say, is not a set of ethics lightly worn or easily adhered to. It does seem, to me at least, as somewhat countercultural even for agrarian peasants from Galilee. As I move now to appraise Burton Mack's construction of Q1 it will be interesting to see if that acts as a verification of this picture or as a denial of it.

The Q Gospel: Q1 According to Burton Mack

Before coming to what I make of this I want to say what Burton Mack makes of it. This is because what Burton Mack makes of it has upset a lot of people for his denial of what they see as the generalised (Jewish) eschatological character of Jesus and his message which they would regard as the only viable historical option. Mack does not find that here in Q1 and what he does find has, in the last 35 years, been the butt of more than a

few mean-spirited academic jokes. I am no apologist for Mack, who can surely stand on his own two scholarly feet, yet I do find the way he and his results have been treated has been dismissive at best and disrespectful more often than it should have been. And without good reason.

So what does Mack think we have here? One thing he does think we have, and in Q as a whole, is compositional design rather than a simple mass of sayings collected together without rhyme or reason. (Such a description might better apply to Thomas which, as a seeming list of sayings, has not yet attracted any majorly convincing proposal as to its overall organisation.) Q, according to Mack, is subject to at least two redactions. He writes that:

"seven clusters of sayings in Q share distinctive features that are missing in the rest of the material. Some of these clusters are carefully composed rhetorical units, and all of them address a coherent set of issues with the same audience in view and the same concerns in mind. When analyzed, these compositions do not need the rest of Q in order to make sense as a set of instructions. Further study established that the scribes responsible for Q as a whole had reason not to entirely erase the design of this earlier collection. That fortuitous accident of scribal history, retaining earlier instructional material that happened to be in the form of small compositions, makes it possible to isolate an earlier layer of tradition in Q and thus an earlier stage in the history of the Q community. These seven clusters are now recognized as the remains of the earliest collection of sayings in the Q tradition, the layer of Q material called Q1."

Here Mack argues that what he calls Q1 is “coherent in style and content” (as he would argue Q2 is as well, but in different ways). He further argues that this same material does not need the rest of Q to make sense by itself, something he sees as an argument for its essential integrity as a layer of Q. Here the character of the Q1 material is very important for Mack does not think it is like that of Q2 or Q3. Indeed, in a sense we may say the material in Q1 has been hijacked and redirected by the rest of Q such that Q1, had it been left alone, might be a witness to something else that, in Q as a whole, it is not. This is ironic when, in the dominant scholarly theory of gospel relationships, Q itself is then subsumed into the gospels of Matthew and Luke and made to be a part of what they want the whole to mean - which is something different again. On such a theory the meaning of Q1, as Mack would have us see it, is covered over more and more by fiction so that the historical nugget of truth becomes concealed. The question is, can Mack reveal this historical nugget to us once more?

Mack goes through the Q1 material and lists a set of aphorisms contained within which “put us in touch with the earliest stage of the Jesus movement when aphoristic discourse was the norm”. These sayings he regards as the “aphoristic core” of the Q1 material, data for the “social history of the movement”. He lists these aphorisms (with his section headings) and then summarises their import:

How fortunate the poor; they have the kingdom. (QS 8)

Everybody embraces their kin. (QS 9)

The standard you use will be the standard used against you. (QS 10)

Can the blind lead the blind? (QS 11)

A student is not better than his teacher. (QS 11)

A good tree does not bear rotten fruit. (QS 13)

Foxes have dens, birds have nests, but humans have no home. (QS 19)

The harvest is abundant, the workers few. (QS 20)

Everyone who asks receives. (QS 27)

Nothing is secret that will not be revealed. (QS 35)

People are worth much more than the birds. (QS 36)

Life is more than food. (QS 39)

The body is more than clothing. (QS 39)

Where your treasure, there your heart. (QS 40)

Everyone who glorifies himself will be humbled. (QS 50)

Whoever tries to protect his life will lose it. (QS 52)

If salt is saltless, it is good for nothing. (QS 53)

"Overall, the message of these sayings is that customary pretensions are hollow. Claim to superior status based on such things as wealth, learning, possessions, secrets, rank, and power is exposed as questionable if not ridiculous. The perspective is that of the underdog, and the vision is that of those who can see through the emptiness, who already know that the emperor has no clothes. There is no sign of hostility toward those caught in the usual binds, and there is no suggestion of a program to change the system that supports questionable values. There is, however, a hint of pensiveness that attends the critique, a desire that those who hear it will come to share their perspective. The expose is also poignant because implicit in the critique is the assumption that there must be a better way to live."

However, accompanying these aphoristic reflections Mack also pulls out a list of instructional imperatives. If the first list is observations about society's problems, this list is more about an injunction to liveable approaches to those observations:

Rejoice when reproached. (QS 8)

Love your enemies. (QS 9)

Bless those who curse you. (QS 9)

If struck on one cheek, offer the other. (QS 9)

Give to everyone who begs. (QS 9)

Judge not and you won't be judged. (QS 10)

First remove the stick from your eye. (QS 12)

Leave the dead to bury their dead. (QS 19)

Go out as lambs among wolves. (QS 20)

Carry no money, bag, or sandals. (QS 20)

Greet no one on the road. (QS 20)

Eat what is set before you. (QS 20)

Ask and it will be given to you. (QS 27)

Don't be afraid. (QS 36)

Don't worry about your life. (QS 39)

Make sure of God's rule over you. (QS 39)

Sell your possessions and give to charity. (QS 40)

Yet there is still a third and more important list that Mack wishes us to notice in his analysis of Q1 for it is this list which leads us to his identification of what this material is

about. These are the themes Mack sees as being given repeated emphasis throughout the Q1 material:

Voluntary poverty (QS 38, QS 39, QS 40)

Lending without expectation of return (QS 9)

Critique of riches (QS 8, QS 38, QS 40)

Etiquette for begging (QS 9, QS 27)

Etiquette for troublesome encounters in public (QS 20)

Non-retaliation (QS 9, QS 10, QS 20)

Rejoicing in the face of reproach (QS 8)

Severance of family ties (QS 19, QS 52)

Renunciation of needs (QS 8, QS 19, QS 39, QS 40)

Call for authenticity (QS 13, QS 35, QS 53)

Critique of hypocrisy (QS 12)

Fearless and carefree attitude (QS 36, QS 39)

Confidence in God's care (QS 26, QS 27)

Sense of vocation (QS 19, QS 20)

Discipleship without pretension (QS 11, QS 14, QS 38, QS 50, QS 52)

Singlemindedness in the pursuit of God's kingdom (QS 19, QS 39, QS 40, QS52, QS53)

"These themes," says Mack, "point to a way of life that historians recognize as a pattern of behavior highly recommended by popular philosophers during the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods. Q1 enjoins a practical ethic of the times widely known as Cynic." This is not what we had seen in Thomas above and you can be sure that Mack wants to

steer well clear of a Jewish eschatological Jesus in Q1, a Jesus who comes much more to the fore in Q2 as a characteristic of a later redactional phase of Q as Mack and several other Q scholars have it. However, that is not the end of the story for, as can be plainly seen, there is overlap between the content of Q1 and that of T1 both in terms of sayings and of themes. In any case, Mack is not so much arguing that “Jesus was a Cynic-like sage” here as he is arguing that that is how the character Jesus is being depicted here by his literary preservers. Perhaps, we may conjecture, the Q writers of Q1 are the Cynics and Jesus is in receipt of their makeover? Or perhaps it is Jesus who is the Cynic and they are preserving him as sympathizers would? Given Q seems more in receipt of compositional design than Thomas, does that make us as readers more susceptible to being deceived by the design or being deceived by Thomas’s apparent lack of it? Whatever the answer to these questions, I do not dispute that Mack has got the depiction in Q1 correct. Jesus does seem to be presented as a kind of Cynic sage and not one, I think, who is made less Jewish by so being. Being a Cynic does not mean “being a Greek and not being Jewish” as Mack himself, Crossan, Downing and even Kloppenborg have shown in their scholarship. Thus, we have this general description from Mack regarding the Jesus of Q1 and his group:

“The Jesus people are best understood as those who noticed the challenge of the times in Galilee. They took advantage of the mix of peoples to tweak the authority of any cultural tradition that presumed to set the standard for others. They found a way to encourage one another in the pursuit of sane and simple living. And they developed a discourse that exuded the Cynic spirit. The aphorisms in Q1 set the Cynic-like tone, and the injunctions reveal a strong sense of vocation that corresponds to the Cynic way of life. The Jesus

movement began as a home-grown variety of Cynicism in the rough and ready circumstance of Galilee before the war."

For myself, and leaving Mack to one side for a moment, I do not want to downplay the eschatological significance of such a depiction *even if we fully accept Mack's Cynic designation*. Here we need to remember that in a Greek context Cynics were themselves engaged in a program that was itself eschatological in the sense that their living according to nature was in pursuance of the goal of the end of civilisation by a process of naturalization. Here we cannot imagine that the goal was for every Greek to become a Cynic. That would have been plainly ridiculous. It was, however, to be a beacon shining brightly in the darkness, a city that cannot be hidden on a hill, that warned society of errors being made and corrective actions to take to avert the imagined danger. Cynics did this by conviction not because their stated aim from the beginning was to make every Greek citizen a Cynic. Similarly, can we say it was Jesus' stated aim to make everyone a follower of his? From the evidence of the CST, T1 and Q1 it would certainly seem not. It would seem more the case that like the Cynics or certain Hebrew prophets, Jesus was more determined to live his public lifestyle as a performative message and to encourage others to do the same regardless of how many actually responded and took this lifestyle up. This, in itself, as with the Cynics, can be seen as an eschatological move where eschatology is not regarded as simply a certain spoken message about certain topics, something I don't think it should be seen as anyway. So, my point here is simple: Cynicism *was* a kind of eschatology, Mack's view notwithstanding. These insights make something Mack says in the course of his Cynic explanation for Q1 very interesting, however:

"It is important to see that there was no sense of external, institutional threat to motivate this change in lifestyle. It is especially important to see that the purpose of the change was not a social reform. The Jesus people were not organizing to fight Roman power or to reform Jewish religion."

This conclusion would run counter to the scholarly (and theological) conclusions of many yet, on the Cynic parallel, would it be seen as so wrong? What would an eschatological band of people proclaiming the kingdom of God in poverty, relying on nature, the gifts of others and a sharp and witty speaker have to offer that could threaten to change Jewish society or remove the military might of the Roman empire? Is not the Cynic model of regarding yourself as humanity's educators actually one to consider here (one appropriately addressed primarily to Jews of course)? We need, I think, to stop imagining Jesus as some kind of superhero who is bound to succeed in whatever he does and regard him more as the destitute, if ingenious, man the earliest sources are actually revealing him to be. We may even have to concede that Jesus did not foresee Christianity or the Church or its future success with a message that we have, in the CST, T1 and Q1 actually barely seen. There is no Lord here, no Christ, no sacrifice and no atonement. There is no Son of God to oppose to Caesar as Mark will have it in the first verse of his gospel. Perhaps we may have to settle for Jesus the Cynic eschatologist who lived a poor yet noted life in Galilee with a relatively few followers since what he was actually asking people to do, love your enemies, give your coat away, have nowhere to lay your head, follow the kingdom and not look back, be a lamb amongst wolves, rely on others for your continued existence, sell all your possessions, lose your life on account of Jesus' message, *was difficult and, therefore, predetermined not to be for everybody!* Our sources here are suggesting a Jesus character who committed himself to something he

defined as the kingdom of God yet there is no sense that he ever expected everyone to simply follow him and neither were the expectations he had, or the conditions of the kingdom he laid out, set up to entertain huge crowds of followers anyway. This was more about rambling bands than megachurches. The Cynic designation, I think, fits quite well and in more ways than one.

What does differentiate Jesus from Cynics generally, though, seems to be that signs of social formation are evident where, for Cynics, that was more usually not the case. Most especially this is seen in that rules for the community are in evidence as ethical injunctions. The more usual Cynic attitude is to live according to nature and to observe it using your reason for guidance. In this way Diogenes, the most famous Cynic, learns to cup hands to drink and to use a hunk of bread as a spoon. But in Q1 there is clearly a group and Jesus addresses it with ethical codes. The context, however, can still be seen as Cynic and is even addressed in Q, as Mack shows, by using a literary Greek form of argumentation. The subject is not worrying about daily needs and Mack sets it out, in the Greek argumentative style, as follows:

Thesis: One should not worry about life (food) or body (clothing).

Reason: Life is more than food and the body is more than clothing.

Analogy: Ravens do not work for food; God provides for them. You are worth more than birds.

Example: No one can add a day to life by worrying.

Analogy: Lilies do not work, yet are clothed.

Example: Solomon in all his splendor was not as magnificent as the lilies.

Analogy: Notice the grass. If God puts beautiful clothes on the grass, won't he put clothes on you?

Conclusion: One should not worry about food and drink.

Example: All the nations worry about such things.

Exhortation: Instead, make sure of God's rule over you, and all these things will be yours as well.

What I notice most of all about this, in its Greek argumentative form and with its particularly Cynic content, is that *the rule of Israel's God* is the subject of the exhortation and the reason that the original thesis is regarded as correct. I see this as an example of my own thesis that Jesus was perhaps a Cynic-like figure with a peculiarly Jewish, eschatological message. In this the fact that Cynicism was itself a type of eschatology is not a hindrance but a help. Even if this turns out not to be so perhaps it is then instead the case that those who were more Cynic in intent than Jesus are those who were part of his community or a community of those who came to remember him through his sayings when writing Q and so who may be numbered amongst the followers of Jesus in the first couple of decades after his crucifixion.

But are these people, then, to be regarded as early Christians? What about Q1 specifically would make us think so? Where here is Jesus the Christ? Where are the self-referential speeches or references to future events such as him being "handed over" that we find elsewhere? Where is the theology of Jesus' significance salted through the text as we have in the four canonical gospels? Do we not here instead find a kind of sage, a wise man, at most someone revered as an authoritative teacher? Instead, we find more kingdom sayings and kingdom ethics, injunctions to reform your life and live a different

way which will be seen as "the kingdom of God". This is both Cynic and Jewish as we might expect of someone in Galilee where Hellenism and Judaism mixed. There is no figurehead Jesus here though. Instead, "Everyone who glorifies himself will be humiliated, and the one who humbles himself will be praised" (Q 14:11). Instead, the prayer of Jesus is may the Father's name be holy and may his rule take place (Q 11:2). Here, once more, Mack gives us a list of the mentions of this kingdom in Q1:

How fortunate the poor; theirs is God's kingdom. (QS 8)

No one who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back is fit for God's kingdom. (QS 19)

If you enter a town and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, attend to the sick, and say that "God's kingdom has come near to you." (QS20)

But if you enter a town and they do not welcome you . . . say, "Nevertheless, be sure of this, that God's rule has come to you." (QS 20)

When you pray, say, "Father . . . , may your kingdom take place, give us each day our daily bread." (QS 26)

Make sure of his rule over you, and these things will be yours as well. (QS 39)

What is God's kingdom like? It is like a grain of mustard.... It is like yeast which a woman hid in three measures of flour. (QS 46)

Five of these seven cases are also found in T1 which suggests multiple independent attestation for certain sayings of Jesus if nothing else. Yet, if we look at the themes we see a multiple independent attestation of themes too, in what is present and also in what is not present. (Here Mack giddily notes that "none of these references paints an apocalyptic view of the world" and that "the link between the notion of the rule of God

and the pattern of Q's countercultural practices is very, very strong.") I hope to address that in a final chapter here.

Jesus, Gospel and Community: 30-50 CE

Its time to draw investigations to a close, at least as far as this book is concerned. The subject of this book has been a focus on difference and diversity in the earliest remembrances of Jesus with a further focus on one particular component of that diversity, the putative earliest beginnings of what become the Q Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas. In this you should not imagine that I plump for these as "true" where other witnesses, such as Paul or Mark, as I have just had reason to bring attention to in my detached note, are false. It is not any part of my argument in this book that any of these witnesses are not witnesses to some form of veneration of, or belief in, Jesus. Indeed, it *is* the point of this book that they might all be and so that diversity, rather than a narrow uniformity, is the historical truth and, further, so that modern notions of orthodox and heterodox are utterly out of place when applied to the earliest period after the crucifixion and, for some, the resurrection of Jesus. I do, however, think that not all remembrances of Jesus were the same and I have my doubts that all of them can be called "Christian" - as some scholars seem to want to do today in a vain attempt at some version of equality. It is my suggestion that the remembrances we see in Q1 (a putative first layer of the Q Gospel), T1 (a putative first layer of the Gospel of Thomas) and the CST (the Common Sayings Tradition imagined prior to Q and Thomas), as I have discussed them in this book, might not appropriately be described as "Christian" at all and that they are none the worse or, indeed, less true for that. It all depends, of course, what you regard the defining marks of "Christianity" to be.

Having thought about this, I regard these marks as being twofold:

1. Jesus is venerated as Lord and Christ, not just as titles but with the status these titles imply.
2. The content of the message is primarily Jesus himself and his significance, particularly in the matter of his death and his asserted resurrection.

It will be easy to see here that the material I have discussed above as the parallels between Thomas and Q and as two proposals for their earliest contents witness no evidence for such positions or such beliefs. Neither do they posit them of the Jesus that is found in those self-same contents. I do genuinely ask, then, how anyone might reasonably argue that these are *Christian* texts. They are plainly not and, for me at least, do not need to be. Here the descriptor "Christian" does not mean "true" just as the lack of this descriptor does not mean "false". This is to mischaracterise the situation as a binary choice between a singular truth or its opposite, a blatant falsehood, when the realities are almost certainly a lot more hermeneutic, interpretive, nuanced and diverse. This is why, if you refer to the diagrams that accompany this book, one of my own making and another from Burton Mack, you will find lines of differing traditions which mix, or don't, in various ways and an appreciation of the history involved reveals different books which take different views about Jesus based on the differing elements and traditions they engage. One must account for diversity to present an educated history and, I suggest, one must do so in better ways than to argue for a single truth which the heterodox simply deviated from. It has, therefore, especially been my point in this volume of my ongoing studies into the historical Jesus, the formation of gospels and the history of the decades after Jesus that the earliest beginnings of both Q and Thomas

preserve genuine reminiscences of Jesus yet without calling him Christ, without references to crucifixion and without seeing him through the apocalyptic lens of resurrection. Indeed, in these texts the focus is not even the person of Jesus but the content of the sayings he dispenses. This, I think, gives evidences for a community, or communities, of Jesus people who, quite frankly, are not Christians at all but *who still followed and, in some way, held Jesus in high esteem nevertheless.*

This being understood, I would like to draw this book to a conclusion by making seven points of various kinds about what has gone before. These are points about the contents and contexts of the texts I've focused on, the wider historical context of Jesus traditions generally, and where Jesus and the people of Q and Thomas end up as a result of all this.

1). Orality and Contextuality. All alike agree that the original context of Jesus' sayings, and the sharing of Jesus' sayings, was oral. Aside from a few dubious outliers, such as one I found searching online recently which argued that Mark had been written within 3 years of Jesus' crucifixion, all also agree that written gospels were the heirs of entirely oral processes of transmission and repetition lasting decades rather than a few years. This belief, however, has consequences for it is manifestly easy to demonstrate that the meaning of sayings can be changed by context and that context can change the wording of sayings, something which itself changes the meaning of those same sayings. What if we imagine sayings collections such as Q1 and/or T1 may have been historically and which the CST is artificially? Compare these to a more connected narrative like Mark which wants to make strictly narrative sense of any sayings it includes. How might these literary contexts affect or shape the content within? Because, surely, everyone reading this can see that it would?

Sayings, then, can be made to mean entirely different things dependent on the context we choose to see them against or put them within. Recently, this was powerfully brought home to me by an unsavoury incident that happened to me myself. I had engaged in a Twitter conversation with a conservative Christian about morality. Later, I decided to browse his website to inform myself more about his views since I'm often too inquisitive for my own good. But, having done this, I was quite startled to find that this person had actually written up an article on our debate and inserted that debate into a bigger subject having taken a screenshot of one of my tweets which he had inserted into his argument. This argument, furthermore, was one with which I would not have agreed at all. Yet, worse than quoting me without even the courtesy to inform me, this person had actually quoted me *and then drawn his own conclusion about what I was saying and written that conclusion under the tweet as if that was my meaning*. You can probably guess from my bringing this up in this context that I regarded his use of my words as tendentious, inaccurate and deliberately misleading. My saying had been quoted accurately, it was a picture of my tweet so the words were mine, but what he said those words meant were not what I, its author, thought they meant at all. Crucially, the rest of the debate we had had, in which my explanation of my intended meaning was made much clearer, was ignored by the blog and readers were left only the impression he, but not me, the author of the tweet, wanted to convey. Now, imagine this has happened with only one saying of Jesus, let alone hundreds, and you perhaps see the issue!

This puts an onus on the communities and groups of people who preserved and valued sayings of Jesus to a great degree for how do we know they took them as Jesus intended? How do we know that, over time, they didn't find more appropriate or better or just different ways to understand them? And remember, this argument is not even at

the level of changing the words. This is even if the saying was remembered with 100% accuracy as if it had a core form of words which is a very unrealistic prospect in the first place because much more likely is that if Jesus said any of his sayings once then he said them a hundred times in any number of variations. We need to remember that we are talking about a predominantly oral and not literary culture. Meaning is what matters here and not word for word accuracy. This is just one reason why many scholars argue that many variant forms of Jesus' sayings are likely because of the simple fact of many oral variants of them being present in the oral culture of the time. There never was one, pristine, authentic version of a saying of Jesus to find but, as I have already shown, even if there was that doesn't fix its meaning anyway. Meaning requires context. Change the latter and you automatically change the former.

Here some remarks of scholar Stephen Patterson are very pertinent. In his book *The Lost Way*, which is, coincidentally, a book about Q and Thomas and the tradition which gave birth to them, he talks about "the gospel before the gospels." His argument is that literacy in the Roman empire generally, and Palestine particularly, was very low. The simple fact is that way over 9 out of any 10 people you might meet at this time could not either read or write at all. Period. Thus, when we talk about gospels and ask why they didn't appear sooner, Patterson has a prepared answer: there was no one who followed Jesus who could read or write and we shouldn't expect there to have been. This is Palestine in 30-50CE not New York or Berlin in the present day. This should also inform us that no one was sitting around "pining for a gospel" in the years after Jesus either. These were people who communicated almost exclusively orally. If somehow 100,000 gospels had been made and distributed the vast majority of them would have been useless as their recipients could not have read them. When gospels were eventually

created they were appropriated by people at large because they were read out to them or performed. Hearing a gospel read out was the way most people would have become familiar with them. We should not think of people with their own personal libraries reading this new-fangled book called a gospel at home for that would be an anachronism.

But this oral culture, says Patterson, has a pay off. In such a culture things were remembered because they were repeated. Yet, he continues, "Things were never simply repeated; they were repeated and interpreted." After stating this, Patterson gives a great example of how this is so in the Jesus saying "So the last will be first and the first, last." This is its Q form according to Patterson. That obviously means its in Matthew and Luke as well. Yet its also found in Thomas 4:2 and Mark 10:31. But in Mark something has happened for now its not the absolute saying it was in Q. In Mark "*many* of the first will be last and the last first." Perhaps, remarks Patterson with some humour, some of the first have joined the community and don't like the implications of the saying?! Yet also compare this saying in Luke where something else has happened. There "*some* of the first will be last, and *some* of the last will be first." What was once absolute is now mitigated. Can we say this is even the same saying anymore? An absolute reversal has now become something else. The meaning has changed. The saying has been reinterpreted in oral activity. It is these realities we need to keep in mind when we address gospels which are the results of years, if not decades, of oral transmission as interpretation. (An alternate view is also possible. Jesus himself said multiple versions of the saying with different emphases. But what would that then mean?)

2). Who Wrote Q and Thomas? It is fair to say that part of my argument for the creation of Q and Thomas revolves around the existence of some group or groupings of people who preserve sayings of Jesus in ways I think can be fairly described as non-Christian. There is no sense in which I imagine these people as anti-Christian. They are just those who, for whatever reason, don't remember Jesus because of how he died, because they think he rose from the dead in a way that means something or because they attach any exalted significance to him in a scene with apocalyptic connotations. These are people who, for my money, focus on what Jesus said and not who people might imagine Jesus was. The message is the important thing. But can we say anymore about these people, give them some substance and some putative reality? Thanks to the scholarship of some, I believe we can.

John Kloppenborg begins his chapter of *Excavating Q* on "The Q Document and the Q People" with the following words:

"Apart from personal letters, contracts, receipts, and the like, ancient documents were seldom composed merely for private use. They were intended instead for performance before various publics, whose likely reactions had to be anticipated in the very act of composition... Composition was thus a social act in which the audience was not an incidental 'consumer' of the literary work but was present in the act of composition from the beginning."

This is, to say the least, a very intriguing prospect and one is immediately led to ask what Q as a whole might be saying about its audience. Kloppenborg turns to the archaeologist, Jonathan Reed, who has done work on what he calls a "social map of Q" to

address the question of its provenance. Here Reed focuses on the fact that there are nine named places in Q as a whole which can be seen as forming 3 concentric circles. The three places at the centre of these circles are the insignificant Galilean towns of Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida. Yet in Q itself these places are excoriated. As Reed has it, "These three places distinguish themselves from the other six places in Q by the vehemence of their condemnation and by their otherwise anonymity in antiquity." The question must then be asked why anyone would want to condemn three nowheres in Lower Galilee and Reed answers it himself by suggesting this social map of Q draws attention exactly to this Galilean centre. Pertinent here is the matter of the local knowledge that Q seems to have about Galilee as well. Taking other factors into account, such as where the rhetoric of Q may fit into our history of the time and period and that Q's view of Jerusalem hardly makes it a likely candidate for its origin, this convinces Kloppenborg that this argument forms "the best basis for the assumption of a Galilean provenance for Q". In short, the further we move away from that inner circle of anonymous, Galilean towns, the less sense it makes to mention them in the first place. This argument also holds for the Pharisees who are also mentioned in Q with some apparent knowledge of their practices assumed and who are presumed present in Sepphoris and Tiberias, Galilee's largest towns, before the first Roman-Jewish War that began in 66CE.

Here Kloppenborg points out that, given the context of written documents he has already explained, we need to credit the authors of Q with knowing their audience. This is true because, "The proposition of any effective rhetoric is a knowledge of the audience to be persuaded." If we imagine that Q was successful as a document, and it went on to be in two books of the New Testament, then we must imagine they knew

who they were addressing and how it would play. But here, once again, the contents of Q become important with their portrayals of poverty and itinerancy. Can we imagine such people writing texts? No, we can't, for it is argued that the *writers* of Q are those who *look back* to itinerant times rather than being those who are themselves itinerant in a way that would, and should, seem absurd. On this reading, the itinerants may be the source of the sayings but they are not the writers of Q. Q, in its current form, is the product of some kind of settled group and one, of course, that can write which we have already said narrows down the possibilities considerably. Jesus, for example, and as scholar John Dominic Crossan assumes, contra the Gospel of Luke, should be regarded as completely illiterate unless evidence to the contrary is produced that is not as naive as a story claiming he reads from Scripture. Itinerants as writers of Q, then, is to be regarded as a performative impossibility. Something I would regard as putting the cherry on the top of this particular cake is the point raised by scholar, Dieter Zeller, who reminds us that the mission discourse from Q 10 is introduced with the saying, "beg the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers into the harvest," which addresses those responsible for commissioning such workers. The very next verse of Q, however, is "behold, I send you as sheep among wolves" which addresses those (itinerants!) being sent themselves. This is a crucial distinction to recognise and now Kloppenborg can be introduced once more to summarise this for us:

"Hence, an alternative image of the Q people emerges, one which acknowledges the activities of the itinerant workers, but which implicitly restricts their activities to the early stages of group formation. Itinerants may still have been present when Q was edited, but they no longer exerted a controlling influence on the formation of the document. Nor did their interests dominate those of the entire group."

Here it is perhaps pertinent to note that the stratigraphy proposed by Kloppenborg himself for Q, one largely followed by Mack, is of a document formed in three stages with the itinerants prevalent most of all in Q1 (compare T1) which is what I have focused on above. However, to ever become a text, and a text in which the itinerant community and the sayings they preserved feature, Q has to progress beyond them to a stage at which literary remembrance becomes possible in order for it to be written down at all. Here, however, the content of Q asserts itself again. Q's content is that of a counterculture. Yet, if one is going to be a counterculture at all, there must be a culture to counter. Here is where the analysis of scholars Leif Vaage and Burton Mack does its work in describing the Q community itself as being about *social critique* very much in the way Cynics would be seen in relation to the Greek *polis*. Both scholars insist that this movement was nothing to do with social or religious renewal.

Instead, Q's function, for Vaage and Mack, was simple critique. The Q people saw themselves, as Cynics did of themselves, as society's teachers and educators who were pointing out the flaws and pitfalls, the cracks in the logic, of everyday affairs. Most of all, of course, this was true of the itinerants of Q1, those people and their sayings later redactions preserved even if they were not so inclined themselves. Leif Vaage speaks of these people as popular resisters "to the official truths and virtues of their day." These were those for whom the memory of Jesus (and to a lesser extent John the Baptizer) lived on as popular "anti-heroes". These people stood at odds to the customary habits and aspirations of their cultural context and modelled a way of life in the shadow of which the accepted truths of their day could only seem to be impugned and accused. Such people were not trying to make everyone like them. Instead, they were performing the social function they felt themselves called to carry out according to a logic they

found themselves unable to resist. Here what Kloppenborg calls “Q’s critical and rootless posture” is important in pointing out that this attitude extends to Q as a text and refers not merely to characters who may be found within it.

So who wrote Q? According to Kloppenborg’s analysis, those best placed to fill such a role are “village and town notaries and scribes,” those who were normally tasked with what written documentation people may have needed in the Hellenistic, Roman world. Here not least important to Kloppenborg is that Q1 is formed literarily as *instruction*, something he calls a typically scribal genre at the level of process as well as content. We should not think of these people as great literary minds, however. They were functional figures in their society and not masters of the literary arts. They normally wrote divorce bills or loan contracts and the like. Q, let us not forget, is largely a collection of sayings with fairly basic organisation (and Thomas is even more so). Yet these are people in possession of writing technology and who do have the ability to write. It is not impossible to imagine that such people, not too high on society’s ladder, might have affinity with the counterculturals Q and also Thomas present. John Dominic Crossan, in his mammoth tome which attempts to adequately explain the entirety of “the birth of Christianity” seems to agree with this conclusion when he writes that “Jesus’ kingdom of God movement began as a movement of peasant resistance but broke out from localism and regionalism *under scribal leadership*” (emphasis mine). He thinks of both Q and the initial activity which created Thomas as “on a geographical trajectory from Galilee to Syria”. This respects DeConick’s reference to a Semitic undercurrent to her kernel sayings in Thomas without agreeing that Jerusalem is a likely point of origin, something she seems pulled to by the saying in GTh 12 which mentions James of Jerusalem so

prominently. Even DeConick herself, however, does admit that there seems to be a connection between Q and Thomas in need of further scholarly investigation.

Perhaps, then, we should let scholar, Bill Arnal, a student of Kloppenborg's, have the casting vote here. In his essay "The Rhetoric of Marginality: Apocalypticism, Gnosticism, and Sayings Gospels" Arnal writes the following:

"The Gospel of Thomas and Q share the following social features: literacy and a scribal mentality, a probable setting in village or town life, a group organization that did not entirely withdraw from the larger world of which it constituted a part, and a group mentality characterized more than anything else by a particular understanding of the world and a corresponding ethic. Moreover, both documents were composed in a context in which increased exploitation of the countryside and peasantry by the urban elites contributed to considerable social disintegration and economic distress (such as debt, dispossession, tenancy, impoverishment and hunger). Both groups respond to this crisis by adopting a highly critical stance towards ordinary social conventions and political structures, a critique of wealth, an inversion of normal values and a rejection or critique of urban-based religious institutions."

What I take Arnal to be saying here is that Q and Thomas seem very alike. Of course, they then go on journeys which leave them ending up somewhat different; Q becomes apocalyptic after Q1 and ends up in canonical gospels as part of martyrological salvation narratives and Thomas becomes esoteric and marginalised, perhaps due to the fact its traditions are seconded to Eastern Syria. Yet the point seems to be, and the Common Sayings Tradition is there to initiate such an idea, that these sayings seem to come from

a similar place and to address similar concerns and audiences in not so dissimilar ways. That's something to think about.

3). A Matter of Taste? I have held discussions relevant to Q1, T1 and the Common Sayings Tradition above and also laid out their contents for my readers. (I left out the precise listing of the contents in this book but the curious will easily be able to find them by looking at the scholarly resources I referred to.) In my view and, it must be said, in the view of some, but not all, scholars of the New Testament period, there is, at the very least, nothing particularly implausible or inherently unlikely or unfeasible about their contents. After all, we must remember when dealing with Q, whether we find particular theories for its creation plausible or not, that we are dealing with material which is firmly embedded within two canonical gospels and with parallels both inside and outside the canon in some respects. Even if we turn to Thomas, a disdained and disparaged document in some quarters, even there about half of the sayings, many in DeConick's Kernel Gospel (her version of a first layer of Thomas material), have parallels *inside* the New Testament gospels. This is not heretical or heterodox material I have discussed in this book for a lot of it firmly finds a home in orthodoxy. So what's the problem with it and why do conservatives resist its (to them) siren calls and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge their importance to genuine historical discussion of Jesus' legacy?

The answer, I have come to believe, lies not in what they say which, as I will repeat again, is more often than not something the New Testament says itself, but for *what they don't say*. What they don't say, of course, is that Jesus is Lord and Christ and that his death is salvific and his resurrection means eternal life for all who believe in him. This is to say that Q and Thomas in general lack the theological and ideological markers that certain

kinds of faith readers require to take them seriously. Therefore, those fixated on the notion that Jesus himself must be significant from the first in just such ways, that he must know all this intimately himself and that he must quite deliberately make sure his closest followers know it too, even if, inexplicably, they don't seem to get it until much later, then theories coming along which pretend to propound texts within 20 years of his death which have no interest in exactly just such things can only seem to be removing any basis for the notion that this was the system of belief that Jesus himself taught and that, scandalously, their faith has been built on a lie. It is, for such people, to turn the world upside down to suggest that later gospels such as those in the New Testament, clearly creating fictional (and different) narrative worlds, might be about something other than the strict recitation of honest, historical truth. Those who come along making arguments which either dissect those gospels into earlier pieces that might conceivably have had a different meaning, or which seem to deny the meaning inherent in the texts with the imprimatur of "this is how it happened" upon them, can only then be seen not as genuine historians but as those out to impugn the faith with falsehoods.

Yet I believe that such conservative readers need to take a good long look in the mirror and ask themselves how narrative gospels, which, I concede, may contain truthful reminiscences, could be true *as stories* when we know very well that stories create their own narrative worlds and make the points that their writers want to make in tandem with what their audiences are looking to receive. This is true whether you are dealing with Mark and Q or John and Luke or Matthew and Thomas. Do such interpreters imagine that anyone has written a gospel *exactly* as Jesus would have done if he hadn't in all likelihood been unable to read and write at all? At the very least it seems to me, and I apply this point to any gospel ever written, it must be conceded that writers write

what *they* want to write and not what some other person might have written. If we don't accept this it would seem that, for some, we have slipped back into notions of gospel writers as mindless automatons writing just exactly what the divine animus, perhaps disguised as the spirit of historical verisimilitude, is making them write. What all this smacks of, in fact, is the fact that for such conservative readers it is one huge problem that people are actually human beings and that some crazy people behind Q and Thomas's earliest sayings might actually have had a rather human view of Jesus as a special example of a man with a lot of interesting things to say but not much more than that. This is certainly not what he is inside the canon, especially in places like Mark or Paul or John, where he can be Son of God, justification for sins and heavenly divine Light all rolled into one. One wonders, if things were the other way around, how the same readers would think on such things if they were in what they would then regard as the *wrong* sources?

So my point here is that the prejudice in which Q and Thomas are often held is not so much a historical prejudice. These texts are not ruled out because they are heterodox or fanciful or absurd. They are ruled out on christological grounds and that because they simply are not christological at all! It is a case of simple theological bias because these texts do not parrot treasured verities back at such readers as their special texts do. Here history has been forgotten in favour of verifying that which you have come to dogmatically venerate in a naked partisanship which, to say the least, does not seem very scholarly. It may here be observed that it seems a very Western Christian vice to make of their saviour something divine, something which focuses on his end, and to have completely forgotten about the beginning with the imagined Incarnation and that Jesus was actually a human being, a son of man one might almost say. Jesus' proposed use of

this circumlocution for himself then becomes the ultimate irony since, inside the canon, this phrase is often taken to mean some special, exalted being whereas, elsewhere and without the canon breathing heavily down its neck, it can simply be a person, a human being, a man. Many Christians, scholars included, it seems, have still not got over their debates about how human and divine fit together in one person. In truth, those of us not so inclined must wonder how it could ever have been imagined that it could. Yet to disparage historical findings due to matters of theological and christological taste would seem somewhat perverse, if not entirely unsurprising.

4). Who Believes in the Resurrection? If we read the four canonical gospels we get intimations that belief in the resurrection was not universal. Matthew states this baldly yet enigmatically in the very brief comment “but some doubted” (Matt 28:17). In Mark, meanwhile, he had already narrated a scene in which the women at the empty tomb had “fled from the empty tomb, for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk 16:8). This self-refuting statement, of course, would mean, if true, that no one would have ever been aware there was an empty tomb or the resurrection which Mark uses it to symbolise. That aside, this is hardly the response of belief which is probably why Matthew, as is his regular practice, lifts the story for his own account but turns the fear into the uncomfortable duo of “fear and great joy” and then has Jesus appear to them anyway to resolve the problem (Matt 28:8-10). In the account of Luke, on the other hand, the disciples as a whole do not believe what seems to them to be the extraordinary tales of the women (who, now free from Mark’s literary shackles, are blabbing for all they are worth) and two rather anonymous followers of Jesus can walk along the road with a resurrected Jesus without even recognising him in what seems a theological tale told to explain to readers what has

happened and to manifest Jesus in the symbolic action of the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:31). In John Mary goes to the tomb to find a body but goes to tell Peter and, presumably, John himself that the tomb is empty wherein they run to the tomb and Peter does not believe even if John, the authority behind the gospel's own witness, does. Meanwhile Mary, still not believing, chats to someone she assumes is the gardener until called by name which releases the spell and she recognises him. John, of course, is also the gospel in which one of the disciples, Thomas (not the one responsible for the gospel of the same name), flatly refuses to believe unless he can probe the physical wounds for himself. This story concludes with the highly pertinent "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (Jn 20:29).

Overall, this is a confused and partial picture but it is not one, I believe, that disputes that the resurrection was not believed by some, perhaps those who had very physical requirements in terms of what it would take them to believe it. It also seems to be the case that the canonical gospels, and Luke's and John's especially, were all too aware that not everyone would have been able to probe wounds and check for marks on the risen body. Hence why Luke is so keen on saying how it is explained that everything happened "according to the Scriptures" (Lk 24:27, 45-47), which he aims to make one future appealing authority, and John's blessing for those who don't need physical proofs in the first place. Both responses indicate that in the face of doubt an answer was required. Nevertheless, of course, it remains the purpose of all four canonical gospels to maintain that Jesus did indeed rise, at least, as far as they are witnesses to it is concerned. Its just that, in doing so, it seems evident that it wasn't quite as absolute a belief as some might have hoped for.

If we are historical realists this should not surprise us, of course. For it is indeed the case that not everyone could have probed a body. The vast majority, and certainly those hearing the post resurrection preaching of those who did believe in it, simply had to accept it as a proposition based on argumentation and whatever background beliefs they may have held about resurrection. Not all Jews did believe in resurrection and most, as with Paul the Pharisee, only believed in one general one rather than individual ones that could happen here, there and everywhere. So, that people would automatically accept the resurrection is not something we should think was necessarily likely and neither should we assume they would find such a thing the most important thing about Jesus. This becomes more pointed if, as it is suggested, groups and communities of people who revere Jesus in other ways, are in evidence say, for example, because they produce sayings gospels that remember Jesus more for the content of his teaching than for an imagined resurrection. This, as will be clear to readers of this book, is in fact argued to be the case. In fact, we might even reasonably ask if some of these non-believers in a resurrected Jesus were not likely to have been members of the twelve, at least half of whom are largely anonymous gospel figures who are barely named, who play no useful role in the recitation of events, and, of whom, Matthew can tautly report "but some doubted". Certainly, it seems to me that the resurrection experience, if I may call it that, was far from the universal phenomenon some would like to claim it was and better answers to the phenomena of Q and Thomas, which show no concern for such a postulate, are required than to either imagine their non-existence (in the case of Q) or to posit their reliance on things they may ultimately be substantially autonomous of (in the case of Thomas).

5). Paul is not the standard. The writings of Paul in the New Testament, by which I mean primarily those referred to as the authentic letters of Paul, attest to a marketplace of beliefs in the first century CE and not only for Jews but for Gentiles as well. Yet the problem with Paul's writings is their geographical scope. Paul travelled throughout Asia Minor, from where he himself came, and through Greece and eventually wound up in Rome. This means that Paul was a relative stranger to Palestine, where Jesus and his original movement had spent their entire time, and that Galilee, the land that Jesus had trodden in the gospels, was a place he had never even been. It seems that he may only have even been to Jerusalem perhaps twice and then for no more than a few weeks in total in this same period. Syria, on the other hand, is another place about which we hear next to nothing from Paul. Yet, all that being the case, why should we imagine that what Paul knows about Jesus, and especially what he knows about beliefs in Jesus in these Palestinian places, is anything we should take particular notice of? Is it not actually more historically accurate, not just from Paul's own testimony regarding his travels but from an analysis of his message, to argue that he is apparently largely ignorant of Jesus himself in his life and mission?

It strikes me then, as exceedingly strange that some kinds of scholarship have, in some respects, decided that what Paul thought, everybody must have thought. Paul himself testifies to other missionaries with "a different gospel", even if he does not think it really is a gospel, and this was in the places he knew. Yet what about those he didn't? Or those he did? Was "the gospel" in Jerusalem the same as Paul's? What about in Galilee, about which we hear almost nothing from the New Testament after the crucifixion and resurrection save for a cursory mention in Acts 9:31 together with the "the churches" in Judea and Samaria? Did Peter and James preach the same things as each other and were

these both the same as Paul? And how might we compare all three to what anyone in Galilee believed, or in Syria? Should what Paul believed and taught have any bearing on such a question, a man who never met Jesus before he was crucified, even if he claims to have met him after, and who, at most, was only ever in the company of those who even had for a matter of weeks in his entire life? Even if we add in the time Paul spent “persecuting Christians” before his conversion and the catechism he seems to repeat in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, as well as what was “of first importance” in 1 Corinthians 15, this by no means suggests that Paul was either cognisant of the various beliefs extant across Palestine about Jesus nor that his own gospel is the standard by which to measure anybody else’s.

For me, however, it ultimately comes down to the following. If we compare the authentic letters of Paul to the putative sayings gospel, Q, and the actual sayings gospel, Thomas, what is the difference? From my perspective it is that Paul largely talks *about* Jesus and the sayings gospels almost exclusively claim to *quote* Jesus. In that difference, by the by, it is irrelevant what people might argue from silence that Paul did or did not know personally about Jesus. Whatever he knew, if anything, he apparently did not need or use when writing letters and sharing his gospel in such a way. However, therein lies a huge disparity of method if nothing else. What this comes down to is the claim that in Q and Thomas, especially in those putative first layers of material that various scholars in the biblical academy today claim to find, sayings of Jesus are preserved shorn of Paul’s theological and christological baggage. Is that such a difficult, impossible, inconceivable claim to accept? If it is, you will reject Q and Thomas and find reasons to either explain them away, marginalise them or neutralise them. If it is not, you will press on to see where this avenue of historical enquiry might lead in the belief that Paul is not an

example of what every post-Jesus group who remembered Jesus may have remembered him for. You will have decided, in other words, that *diversity is the more historical truth*.

6). Where is Jesus? You may be wondering where Jesus is in all this diversity and my answer is “Jesus is in his saying”. Note that this is not “Jesus is in his sayings”. The distinction to draw there is twofold. First, Jesus is in both his speech and his deeds conceived of as speech acts for, if there is any consensus at all about Jesus in canonical and non-canonical gospel sources, it is that, at least for part of his life, he lived a certain lifestyle in which the lifestyle, and the activities in word and deed within that lifestyle, were the message. Jesus’ life at this point, we might say, was performative. But the second distinction to draw is that Jesus is in *his* saying. He is not so obviously in yours or mine or Q’s or Mark’s or Paul’s or that of Thomas. My point here is this. The equation for meaning is content + context = meaning. However, if you remove either the content *or* the context then you change the meaning. So say we have some saying of Jesus and we have worked our scholarly hocus pocus on it to the extent that we have convinced our credulous audience that the saying is genuine: Jesus said this saying. So what? Presumably what we actually want is Jesus’ meaning in saying said saying? But *unless we have Jesus’ context to go with the content* then we *don’t* have Jesus’ meaning in uttering the words even if we have the content of what he said with 100% reliability and accuracy. This is an issue for interpreters of any and all gospel traditions because, even as we argue back and forth over the content of Jesus’ sayings as historically valid, how do we know that the contexts they are supplied in, even where they are supplied, a conundrum in itself, are accurate to the sayings they are supplied with? If we get the context wrong then we also misunderstand the saying and misconstrue Jesus.

This is a live and ongoing hermeneutic issue in gospel studies and in claiming to have captured or described the historical Jesus. It is presumably why some hermeneutically reposition themselves as no longer describing an historic figure, Jesus, but, instead, regard themselves as describers and depictees of his literary artifacts in the texts produced by communities of interested others. These texts, narrative in the canon and often more fragmentary and sayings based without, are *in no case* depictions of Jesus that capture him in terms of content and context and so, by my equation, they all equally get Jesus *wrong*. Getting Jesus wrong, of course, is simply another way of saying that they *interpret Jesus*. This is, indeed, how I have it for if Jesus didn't collate the sayings collections and he didn't create the narrative gospels then the point of those texts might be many things but one thing they aren't is Jesus' view on what the contents of these texts mean in the contexts they either create or supply. They are and will remain the interpretive presentations of others. This is to say that gospels, sayings or narrative, are fictions where fictions are truth-bearers but not necessarily because they tell the truth. This, in turn, sees truth as an interpretation and, should you not agree with me on that, the ball is in your court to explain why not.

So this is why, even if I wanted to, I could not say that Q is truer to Jesus than Mark or that Thomas is truer in fact than John. Which is to say that I could say these things but, if I did, I would only be arguing for one interpretation of Jesus over another based on my own interpretation of Jesus, an interpretation of Jesus which would have gone all the way down to the bottom of the process until there was nothing about it that had not been appropriated, scrutinised, moulded and intellectually-shaped by my interpretive gaze. This brings to mind, once more, the comment of Kloppenborg earlier in my text about how ancient texts were written in anticipation of their audiences and their

imagined responses. Texts are, in fact, a matter for writers and their audiences. They are not so much a matter for their subjects who are plastic to the intentions and desires and possibilities of both writers and audiences. No one, I hope, would imagine that any of the now six major objects of scholarly gospel interest, Q, Thomas, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, are journalistic in their intent. None are interested in “the bald facts, only the bald facts, and nothing but the bald facts”. They are all, it must be plainly stated, interpretations of Jesus. And, it must be said for some at least to hear, “What else would they be?” For, in the absence of original context, in the absence of “I was there and so I have my own interpretation of how it went down at the time” (for even being there hasn’t removed interpretation from the process of understanding), texts still supply context *anyway*. Every text makes its own narrative sense. Every reader (or, in the sense in which these documents were first received and performed, hearer) engages in their own appropriative act of understanding. Here we can talk about right and wrong ways to do this by triangulation to an intention, original or otherwise, but to do that we have to imagine that we have possession of these comparative interpretations in the first place to be able to engage in that process - and those things would also only be interpretively achieved.

What this comes down to is that there is no way to read texts and “make sense of them”, our term for arriving at something we call “understanding”, without engaging in interpretation. Earlier, I quoted Stephen Patterson as remarking that even in the sharing of Jesus’ sayings by the oral processes of the day they were shared and interpreted *as one, organic process*. Writing or reading texts is no different. The writer writes a text and as they write they interpret. The reader reads a text (or the hearer hears a text) and as they read (or hear) they interpret. So I must admit to being somewhat frustrated with

some quite notable scholars, such as Dale Allison and Tom Wright, scholars I respect and have interacted with in my work at length, because they seem to have been possessed by this view that making interpretive choices in the scholarship of the historical Jesus and the history of the gospels is, somehow, out of bounds. These are both scholars who have written in their own work, for example, that we should not dissect and chop up the gospels into new piles of material, a separating of the historical wheat from the unhistorical chaff, by interpretational devices of our own intellectual making. *But what else could we do?* And, if I may put it like this, what else does Allison think he has done in his book, *Constructing Jesus*, when, having made this complaint, he offers as an alternative trusting the gist of the New Testament gospels instead? What does Wright think he has done when, in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, he creates a historical-theological metanarrative of his own imagination to explain the activity of Jesus? It seems indisputable to me that here both of these eminent and venerable scholars have exactly engaged in interpretive acts and so it cannot be interpretation they are against or, in fact, interpretation they have avoided in their own work. In fact, their complaints are not against interpretation at all. They are against interpretive acts which result in new interpretations with which they would not agree as they violate interpretive principles of their own. Yet what Wright and Allison need to realise, as with many others, is that the rhetorics of various interpretations and interpretive practices is exactly the game they are in. In truth, there is no other game to play.

So in working with gospel tradition it is exactly a matter of making interpretive choices about what to trust and what not to, about what fits and what doesn't. It is exactly about dissection of this bit of the textual body here and disposal or repositioning of that bit of the textual body there. Here *it does not matter* that this may be occurring according to

the interpretive sense of some interpreter for *what is the alternative? Where, in fact, is the alternative?* And what else is there to be had at the end of this process but a fictional text that exists in its fictional world as something which, it is claimed, infuses some things a fictive “we” regards as of import with meaning? That may be the gospels we imagine ourselves in receipt of, the earlier kernels or layers embedded within gospels we claim to find or the books we write today which imagine to describe and explain Jesus in his historical reality. Yet, of course, we may choose to ignore this and, instead, imagineer a narrative which we support with a rhetoric of “the truth” or “historical reality” or “trustworthiness” or even “certainty” but those who do so must forgive some of the rest of us if we see that for what we think it is: just another rhetoric and just another interpretation; something which has not escaped these things but something that has, instead, tried to use these things to deny them in themselves: a rhetoric and interpretation of the denial of rhetoric and interpretation. Instead, we must plainly state that *there is now no non-interpretive Jesus, no non-rhetorical Jesus and no non-fictional Jesus.*

“So where is Jesus?” you ask me again, once more, now chastened by my own rhetoric. Jesus, I reply, is “in his saying” conceived of as his content + his context to = his meaning. Is that in historical texts? Perhaps sometimes but also perhaps more rarely than we would like. Yet, you will say, it remains true that others can speak truly of people not themselves. Indeed, they can. But in order to establish that you still need the first thing to triangulate the second or, at least, you still need to make a very good guess about the first thing, one that the world we live in allows you to get away with, to triangulate the second. Am I saying, then, that Jesus is lost to us in his historical reality? I am saying that there is no non-fictional presentation of Jesus, that there is no non-rhetorical interaction

with Jesus and no non-interpretational understanding of Jesus. I am saying that if you regard some modern constructions of Jesus or the historical conditions of his creation as akin to Frankenstein's monsters then it would be better for you to turn around and consider the face on the Frankenstein's monster that you have created yourself. *For all have created equally and all we are actually arguing about is which is the better creation.*

7). The Actualized Kingdom. What, then, of Q1, T1 and the Common Sayings Tradition or even of Q and Thomas, the documents they are imagined as formative stages of? I have myself become convinced that they are what scholar Stephen Patterson calls examples of "actualized eschatology". For example, this is what Patterson has to say about Thomas as a whole in his 1993 book, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*: "This is not realized eschatology, it is *actualized* eschatology. If the kingdom is to exist at all, it is up to Thomas Christianity to make it exist."

This "Thomas Christianity":

"offers a real, present challenge to the world. It calls into question the ways of the world, its standards, its goals, its notion of what is meaningful in life. Thomas Christianity's social radicalism, as a form of asceticism, has precisely this effect."

This is also what we saw in Burton Mack's Q1 and it is what we see, if we look, in John Dominic Crossan's versions of the beginnings of Q and Thomas too if we read his *The Birth of Christianity*. What this all amounts to, I believe, is a kingdom, in both texts, that is made present by doing and specifically by the doing of the communities that created them and potentially by those who hear or read them. This is not a kingdom Jesus makes

present by his special nature, must less by cosmically significant actions he takes, either knowingly or unknowingly, which are later raised to significance by the commentary and recitation of others. It is, instead, a kingdom made actual by repetition and reproduction. It is a performative kingdom of those who regard their function in society as to be critiques of society's norms, values and habits. It is groups of social nobodies imagining that their nothing can be a kingdom and seeing through the imagined substance that civilised societies will customarily give to their entirely artificial creations.

Asking myself what I might characterise this as for myself, so as not to simply rely on the constructions of others, I came up with the notion of "Cynic Eschatology" (see below). But this should not be immediately misunderstood as me saying that those behind either Q or Thomas *were* a formal version of someone we would designate a Cynic. It is my understanding of reading scholars such as Mack, Crossan or F. Gerald Downing that "Cynic" in their usage always means "Cynic-like" for I give them the credit for realising that what a Cynic even was in the ancient world was a disputed thing and by no means bound to be exactly the same from one example to another. Most Cynics, for example, seem to have been single. Yet Crates and Hipparchia were married. We still regard them as Cynics, however. So in saying that Thomas and Q exhibit the characteristics of Cynic eschatology, and, in my view, more especially in the formative or kernel layers that I have focused on especially in my study above, I am saying that they exhibit the Cynic "civilisation denying", desire for a world watched over by the gods (in Jewish context, of course, by the Jewish God) and that they offer this kingdom of God to others. This is not in return for a hand up in civic society but in a simple mutuality which reverses and challenges values. These are, to quote Downing, "counter cultural behaviours as criticism of prevailing cultural arrangements." Cynics, we may recall, wished to exchange *nomos*,

law or custom, for *physis*, nature. God's kingdom, thus, was a matter of a direct imposition of the natural order of things as watched over and arbitrated by God or the gods. The eschatology here is that in such a stance society and culture are denied and "undesired" by those taking part in such a deliberate social critique. The apparent stances of those we see reflected and imagined in Q1, T1 and the Common Sayings Tradition are then those which critique the prevailing political, cultural and social conditions in the ways they reimagine existence and act as encouragement to perform the conditions of their imagined kingdom of God. For these people belief + practice = lifestyle. That lifestyle is regarded as the kingdom of God and that kingdom stands as a challenge to, and a denial of, the kingdoms and practices of their present world experience. I conceive of it as not Christian at all, a Jewish-Cynic hybrid, and as connected to Christianity by others only because the same Jesus is a point of origin for both phenomena. That some of Thomas and all of Q is later pulled into the more dogmatic phenomenon, Christianity, and swallowed whole may then be seen as unfortunate.

Jesus and Cynic Eschatology

In closing the main body of the text of this study I referred to something I phrased as "Cynic eschatology" to describe what I saw as the mode of lifestyle of those behind the first layer of Q, the kernel of sayings at the root of the Gospel of Thomas and the 37 complexes of sayings common to Q and Thomas referred to as the Common Sayings Tradition. This phraseology, I concede, will seem like a curiosity to some, an impossibility to others and perhaps even to some others as an attempt to blind with rhetoric. It is, I think, none of these things although, I again concede, it may turn out that I, or others,

can think of a better name for it than this. Yet I insist that what I am trying to indicate with this idea is entirely serious and does some real work.

The issue is this. When I study the traditions about Jesus, either on a wider scale or even within the limits of deconstructions of Q and Thomas down to their earliest forms, there are two phenomena I seem unable to get rid of. The first is eschatology. Its primary symbol is 'the kingdom of God' and, even if that were the only eschatological thing in the traditions about Jesus, that would be enough to demonstrate eschatology was a primary motivation of the earliest currents of the Jesus movement. We may also note, as fans of an apocalyptic Jesus always do, that eschatology abounds throughout the Jesus tradition and the New Testament as a whole. It cannot be avoided or marginalised so, instead, it must be explained. But there is another phenomenon I cannot eradicate in those same traditions either and I hinted at it in a previous book, *Jesus of Galilee, Son of Dog*, when I made the point that I do not consider anyone to have adequately understood what Jesus and his earliest movement were about that cannot explain why 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' does not seem to be right at the centre of everything that movement was about. There really only was one movement in the ancient world at that time that eulogized poverty and that was the movement known as Cynicism.

My problem now, though, is that biblical scholarship, from an apocalyptic eschatological side and from a sapiential wisdom side, will rise up against me on both flanks to attack me by saying that those two concepts are mutually refuting. One cannot be eschatological *and* a Cynic, a Cynic *and* eschatological. In this appendix I am going to beg to differ. I think, on the one hand, that Cynicism is actually a Greek kind of eschatology. I

also think that eschatology can refuse the apocalyptic language and thought that so many who see an eschatological Jesus seem unable to resist as a consequence. So my task here is to show how Jesus and his earliest followers, at least in Q and Thomas if not also when using a wider concatenation of sayings as a database, lies at an intersection of good, honest Cynicism and an entirely Jewish eschatological frame of reference. My argument, then, is NOT that Jesus was a Cynic. That would be to misconstrue my point. It is to argue that Jesus and his movement saw themselves within an eschatological frame of reference which *combines* Jewish eschatology (but not with an apocalyptic self referentiality on Jesus' part) with a Cynic cast of thought such that the lifestyle they moulded for themselves must equally be described in terms of both. In fact, without one, the other is not enough to account for the totality of the evidence. Let me explain.

The Thought World of A Cynic

In my series of books on Jesus in the context of his historical situation and the gospels that imagine to capture it I have already had cause to discuss the Cynics. I did this in both *The Gospel of No One* and *Jesus of Galilee, Son of Dog*. Yet at this point in time it would seem good to refresh our memories. If, for example, we consider a popular anthology about the Cynics such as Robert Dobbin's *The Cynic Philosophers from Diogenes to Julian* what do we learn about this way of life and the thought associated with it? In this book Dobbin gives a concise introduction to the Cynics in terms of their ethics and values and the key themes which identify them to others before sketching out biographies of a list of Cynic notables of whom, of course, the most important, the Cynic icon himself, Diogenes 'the Dog', is paramount. (Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, Dobbin also makes reference to 'The historical Jesus as a Jewish Cynic' here too!) Thereafter, Dobbin

anthologizes a concatenation of ancient texts relevant to Cynics and Cynicism to give readers a feel for this phenomenon.

However, the question immediately needs to be asked if 'Cynicism' is so easily pinned down or if, in fact, it is more a fact of 'the Cynics' as a matter of individual Cynic performance than 'Cynicism' as a movement. Disparity between the actions and beliefs of individual Cynics, albeit that betray familial similarities, is, in fact, one of its most profound legacies. In his work writing of the lives of ancient philosophers, for example, Diogenes Laertius makes this point himself when he discusses the "doctrines found among Cynics in general, working on the presumption that Cynicism really is a distinctive school of philosophy and not – as some maintain – just a way of life." I myself would fall at that end of the spectrum which regards it more as a "way of life" than a "school of philosophy". Cynicism had no tests to pass to become a Cynic. One did not go anywhere to "learn" it (unless it was back to the wild). Indeed, Cynics are, in fact, autodidacts and the normal Cynic mode of learning was observation of nature and the use of your God-given reason to learn from what you observed. That said, students of the ancient Cynics still manage to fettle from these disparate individuals (and often they were individuals although even this is not uniform) a set of markers which, in cross referencing them, leads us to those we might describe as 'Cynic'. Such a list goes something like this:

- *reversal of values

- *acceptance of suffering and an attitude of endurance

- *imagining the way to the blessing of contentment has been found (where this involves both justice and virtue)

- *a simplicity of existence

- *askesis
- *an attitude which defaces the currency of civilisation
- *renouncing of possessions, fame and power
- *having a philosophy that is a lifestyle rather than a set of beliefs
- *a withdrawal from traditional institutions and disinterest in them as entities
- *acting with the licence of the outsider
- *eulogizing poverty
- *self-sufficiency
- *detachment from civic and economic society
- *living with nature
- *bold speech
- *being regarded by the populace as “wise” and as acting out of a moral reason
- *a distinctive dress of cloak, bag and staff
- *a performative, educating purpose to their existence

If we cross reference Jesus and his movement using the texts I have discussed in this book it is my view that we get a fair amount of interaction between them and such markers of the Cynic as I have referenced here from a reading of Dobbin’s book and, in doing that, as I will shortly, it is important to remember that the canonical gospels, which are mythological and fictional presentations of Jesus that set him in an entirely Jewish milieu within the Roman empire, have no special historical call to be regarded as the definitive setting of Jesus and those who were round about him. This is exactly what Burton Mack complains about in his 2001 book *The Christian Myth* when he bemoans the fact that a myth such as that created by the New Testament has now simply been taken for true because its context has been added to its content to give us its meaning. This is

not simply a matter of creative writing which creates a context for the content but also of such writing excluding other contexts for its content (such as a Cynic context, for example). The historical question then becomes why we should accept the context given and especially why we should do that without at least exploring other possible contexts. In the face, for instance, of a theory like that which posits a Q Gospel in several layers and where the first layer, by any reasonable viewing, seems to have numerous Cynic markers within it, and where the second layer, which subsequently contextualises and resets the meaning of the first layer within the very different world of Jewish apocalypticism, changes the meaning of the whole, we can legitimately ask if the meaning of Jesus and his movement is not changing as time goes on and, that being so, ask what the movement may have originally meant and been about. What, for example, might we make of this tight group of sayings plucked from towards the end of Q1?

"Everyone who glorifies himself will be humiliated, and the one who humbles himself will be praised."

"A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. At the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Please come, for everything is now ready.' But they all began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I've bought a farm, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' And another said, 'I've just bought five pair of oxen and I need to check them out. Please excuse me.' And another said, 'I've just married a woman and so I can't come.' The servant came and reported this to his master. Then the owner in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets of the town and bring in as many people as you find.' And the servant went out into the streets and brought together everybody he could find. That way the house was filled with guests."

"Whoever does not hate his father and mother will not be able to learn from me. Whoever does not hate his son and daughter cannot belong to my school. Whoever does not accept his cross and so become my follower, cannot be one of my students."

"Whoever tries to protect his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life on account of me will preserve it."

"Salt is good; but if salt loses its taste, how can it be restored? It is not good for either the land or the manure pile. People just throw it out."

These are the sayings of Q 14 with the interpolating Q 17:33 which is customarily repositioned within Q 14 by Q scholars. I am using Mack's translation of the material and it is all to be found in Q1. It reads to me as a mini Cynic catechesis for it praises humility, it speaks of a feast that all alike can enjoy regardless of status or economic position, it fundamentally disrupts the major social and economic unit of society, and especially ancient society, the family, it speaks of destroying your own life but, exactly in doing that (because of the wise teaching of Jesus), finding it, and it reminds those hearing the teaching of Jesus the wise that in order to be society's educators hearers must retain that salty zing which enables them to be an example at all. In doing all that Jesus uses bold speech to do so, he encourages people to detach themselves from society, which infers a renouncing of possessions which may lead to a necessary self-sufficiency and which itself, in turn, reverses society's values. What does this have to do with a more traditional Jesus who is an apocalyptic figure who died, rose again and may yet return as part of some overarching salvific scheme? In my view, next to nothing.

But things are not that simple for what I do see here in these *very obvious* Cynic parallels is *a form of eschatology*. Cynicism, as I see it, was a civilisation-denying phenomenon that performatively prophesied the end of civilisation itself and saw a contrary uncivilised blessedness *without civilisation*, a new world kingdom under the gods without the things of this form of the world, and, in this sense, it was *world-ending*. This is a form of eschatology but its not the Day of the Lord, 'coming on the clouds of heaven' kind that was birthed within Judaism. Its a very much more present, procedural, actualized, imminent kind of eschatology. So when I talk about "Cynic eschatology" what I mean is that kind of eschatology which fuses this with a Jewish expression of the same - for Jesus was a Jew as no one reasonably denies and as the customary expression 'kingdom of God' indicates. In *The Community Gospel*, which is my concatenation of the Common Sayings Tradition, Q1 and DeConick's 'Kernel Gospel of Thomas', I can, on merely a first pass of that material, identify at least 34 of 98 units (or 35%) which are immediately relevant to such an agenda. I want to go through that with you now to fill out this concept "Cynic eschatology" by means of examples and their aggregation in order to hopefully demonstrate that this is not mere wishful thinking on my part but rather the identification of something worth studied time and examination.

Cynic Eschatology in The Community Gospel?

In his two part introduction to the New Testament first published in the 1980s Helmut Koester had the following to say about the earliest form of Q:

"The key to the understanding of the theology of the earliest form of Q is the 'Inaugural Sermon' of Jesus that is largely preserved in Luke 6:20--49. The promise of the blessings for

the poor, the hungry, and those who are in sorrow determines the status of these believers and commits them to Jesus' command to love even their enemies, that is, to relinquish all worldly power. Discipleship of Jesus implies renunciation of the world and of its social bonds (Q/Luke 14:26-27). The portions of the speeches about the sending of the disciples that derive from Q demand homelessness and renunciation of all possessions (Q/Luke 10:2-12, 16). Discipleship requires the adoption of an itinerant lifestyle (Q/Luke 9:57-60). Jesus is the example for this separation from the established structures of society. But christological titles for Jesus are strikingly absent, nor is Jesus proclaimed as the one who rose from the dead and who will return in the future."

This is certainly a remarkable statement for in it Jesus and his earliest movement, as recorded by Q, seem to fit a decidedly Cynic pattern of behaviour to judge by the indices I have noted above. Yet, at the same time, Koester can write immediately before this section of his book that Q "is dominated by the consciousness of an eschatological community committed to a new conduct as demanded by Jesus in the light of the rule of God, whose coming Jesus had announced." Here Koester is not referring to the later Q2 layer of Q which introduces many overt apocalypticisms, Koester thinks in a way related to the imagined then ongoing Roman-Jewish war at the time of this recension/redaction of the book. This, in other words, is Koester's summary evaluation of Q1, the layer Mack finds Cynic in a thoroughgoing way in his book *The Lost Gospel* (although, due to Mack's dislike for eschatology, not nearly so eschatological as Koester does). Meanwhile, you will remember from earlier in this book that DeConick had regarded her kernel of Thomas sayings as "eschatological" in nature even though that is not always the case for many scholars surveying that often disfavoured text. In his *Ancient Christian Gospels*, on the other hand, Koester says that "The materials which the Gospel of Thomas and Q

share (i.e. the CST) must belong to a very early stage of the transmission of Jesus' sayings" and he thinks that "All of them fit well in the first composition of the Synoptic Sayings Source." He further speaks of "a realized eschatology, centered upon the presence of revelation in the words of Jesus." Yet might not that "realized eschatology" actually be something more Cynic-like, more actualized than realized? Let's turn to the texts...

5. Mission and Message

- T1(14:4): When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside, when people take you in, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them.
- Q1(10:4-11): Do not [carry money, nor bag], nor sandals, [nor staff]...[do not greet anyone]... Whatever house you enter, [say, Peace]...! And if a son of peace is there, [let] your peace [come] upon him; but if not, [let] it [return] <to> you. [<Eat> [what they provide] for the worker deserves his reward. And whenever you enter a town <...>] Heal [the] sick [among them] and say [to them], The kingdom of God has come near to you. [But whenever you enter a town and] they do not receive you, as you go [out of that town], shake off the dust from your feet.
- M(6:7-13): Then he summoned the twelve and started sending them out in pairs and giving them authority over unclean spirits. And he instructed them not to take anything on the road, except a staff: no bread, no knapsack, no spending money, but to wear sandals, and to wear no more than one shirt. And he went on to say to them: Wherever you enter someone's house, stay there until you leave town. And whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, get out of there and shake the dust off your feet in witness against them. So they set out and announced that people should turn their lives

around, and they often drove out demons, and they anointed many sick people with oil and healed <them> .

The first text to consider is the mission discourse from the Common Sayings Tradition and also found, in a slightly different form, in Mark (which I have included for comparison). Here is demonstrated, first of all, that *a community* is envisaged. People are being sent out (or, as Thomas has it, “wherever you go”) with a kingdom message (according to the reconstructed Q text, at least) in a situation in which Jesus is not there. There is then the conjunction of eating and healing. Q also seems to contain instructions banning various equipment for the journey (which Mark corroborates save for the staff and sandals which he gives them back), So here we have possible evidence for an itinerant ministry of multiple people with a similarity to Cynic appearance yet in which the kingdom of God is offered. But what is/was the message here exactly?

6. Peace or Sword

- T2(16): Jesus said, Perhaps people think that I have come to cast peace upon the world. They do not know that I have come to cast conflicts upon the earth: fire, sword, war. For there will be five in a house: there will be three against two and two against three, father against son and son against father, and they will stand alone.
- Q2(12:51-53): ... think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to separate [son] from father, and daughter from her mother, and daughter-in-law from her mother-in-law.

This complex of sayings has Jesus saying that he has come to sow discord and destroy the basic economic unit of society: the family. How might such people survive after that? How might society?

15. **Against Anxieties**

- T1(36): Jesus said: Don't fret, from morning to evening nor from evening to morning, about your food—what you are going to eat, or about your clothing—what you are going to wear. You are much better than the lilies, which don't card and spin. As for you, when you have no garment, what are you going to put on? Who could add to your lifespan? That same one will give you your garment.
- Q1(12:22-31): Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about...life, what you shall eat, nor about...body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? [Look at] the ravens; they neither sow nor reap nor <gather into barns>, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than the birds? And who of you by being anxious is able to add to his span of life...cubit? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if the grass in the field, which is there today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, God clothes thus, [will he not] much more clothe you, oh persons of little faith! [Therefore] do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? <or> What shall we eat? <or> drink? <or> What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek all these things; [for] your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.

Even if the Jesus Seminar didn't think the ending to the Q saying authentic here it still records an interpretation which regards it as about the kingdom. God, indeed, plays a

preserving role here in a very Jewish understanding of things. Yet the whole “life more than food, body more than clothing” ethic is, again, something typically at home in a Cynic context. Life does not here seem to be about work and commercial effort. Those addressed are literally not to fret about feeding and clothing themselves.

21. Serving Two Masters

- T1(47:1-2): Jesus said: A person cannot mount two horses or bend two bows. And a slave cannot serve two masters, otherwise that slave will honor the one and offend the other.
- Q1(16:13): No [one] can serve two masters; for either one will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

Imagine that, historically, Jesus offered the choice of one of two masters: serving God or serving the interests of capital. Well, in this complex it is argued that he did and Jesus chooses God and disregards “Mammon” in the process. Can poverty be far away and do we imagine that Jesus in these texts cares a jot about that? What has this to do with the kingdom we have already heard tell of?

22. Blessed the Poor

- T1(54): Jesus said: Blessed are you poor, for to you belongs the kingdom of God.
- Q1(6:20): And [lift]ing his [eyes to] his disciples he said: Blessed are the poor, for [yours] is the kingdom of God.

Here is one of the key texts of my interpretation of Jesus, a text in which poverty is eulogized, the destitute are made owners and possessors of that most precious of possessions, the kingdom of God, and in which an eschatological program is announced all in one saying. Here values are totally inverted from this-worldly ones to kingdom ones. The old world of commerce and life via wealth attainment is pushed aside for a kingdom owned by the penniless. Jesus is not recorded anywhere else saying that the kingdom “belongs” to anyone other than these destitute people here.

23. Hating One's Family

- Q1(14:26): [If any one] does not hate his [own] father and mother, [he cannot be my disciple]; and [if any one does not hate son and daughter], he cannot be my disciple.
- T1(55:1-2a): Jesus said: Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple, and whoever does not hate brothers and sisters <...will not be worthy of me.>
- T1(101): Whoever does not hate father and mother as I do cannot be my disciple, and whoever does not love father and mother as I do cannot be my disciple. For my mother..., but my try mother gave me life.

More sayings about breaking up the family, the heart of society and the ability to form an economic unit in order to survive in the ancient world. In this complex Jesus almost seems to make it a condition of the kingdom and certainly of discipleship of him, a kind of economic asceticism.

24. Carrying One's Cross

- T1(55:2b): ...carry the cross as I do...

- Q1(14:27): He who does not take his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.
- M(8:34): After he called the crowd together with his disciples, he said to them: If any of you wants to come after me, you should deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me!

The Jesus Seminar didn't like this saying during their deliberations many years ago. The mention of a cross was apparently too near the traditional Christian knuckle for them to contemplate. In Mark, which I have also included here for reference, this saying takes up a pivotal place in his later conceived apocalyptic martyr story after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. But Thomas and Q don't know Jesus as the Messiah, not even once, so is that relevant here? What is stopping us seeing this as a saying of Jesus in which he simply sets out the difficulty of the path before followers and the endurance that will be required in a genuine Cynic way, a way of toil? Crosses were not unusual in Palestine in the first century and it was far from the case that Jesus was the only person put on one. Therefore, we should not run ahead of ourselves and assume the Markan storyline as the only possible one. That, in fact, may be a secondary interpretation of an earlier saying not at all to be interpreted in the sense of a foreshadowing of Jesus' crucifixion.

27. The Feast

- Q2(14:15-23): [[And he] said [to them, The kingdom of God] <is like> a man [who] made a great banquet; [and he sent his servant...to say to the invited, Come, for it is now ready. <They all began to make excuses.> ...<said, I have bought a> field...<said, I have bought>...<said,I>...<married>...And [upon returning] the servant announced these things to his lord. Then the householder, enraged, said to his servant, Go out [quickly] to

the [streets] and [whomever you may find], invite <to the occasion>] And after going out into the streets the servant [gathered all whom he found]; [and] the house was filled.]

• T1(64): Jesus said: Someone was receiving guests. When he had prepared the dinner, he sent his slave to invite the guests. The slave went to the first and said, "My master invites you." The first replied, "Some merchants owe me money; they are coming to me tonight. I have to go and give them instruction. Please excuse me from the dinner." The slave went to another and said, "My master has invited you." The second said to the slave, "I have bought a house, and I have been called away for a day. I shall have no time." The slave went to another and said, "My master invites you." The third said to the slave, "My friend is to be married, and I am to arrange the banquet. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me from dinner." The slave went to another and said, "My master invites you." The fourth said to the slave, "I have bought an estate, and I am going to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me." The slave returned and said to his master, "Those whom you have invited to dinner have asked to be excused." The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner." Buyers and merchants will not enter the places of my Father.

"The feast" is an eschatological symbol as the Q Gospel probably made explicit in its rendition of this parable in which all, "whomever you find" without distinction of class, economic status or ritual purity, are invited in by the host who has been rejected by his original guests. Again, a reversal of values seems to be in view and a new way that is promised in the kingdom. The Gospel of Thomas, meanwhile, has interpreted this as a parable against "buyers and merchants" and the commercialization they represent, a very Cynic theme in its dismissal of a society run on the basis of money.

29. **Blessed the Hungry**

- T1(69:2): Blessed are those who go hungry, so the stomach of the one in want may be filled.
- Q1(6:21a): Blessed are the hungry, for you will be satisfied.

But how will they be filled since they've been ordered to carry no money in complex 5 above? Where will their food come from? Where do poverty and sustenance coincide?

33. **Foxes Have Holes**

- Q1(9:58): And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.
- T1(86): Jesus said: Foxes have their dens and birds have their nests, but human beings have no place to lie down and rest.

This is a "son of man" saying. In a canonical gospel it might be taken to refer to Jesus as a future apocalyptic figure. But what is the relevance of that to a saying about being homeless, especially when said circumlocution "son of man" has been amply explained as an Aramaic way of saying "human being"? Human beings are homeless? That sounds like something Diogenes the Dog might have said.

35. **Give Without Return**

- T1(95): Jesus said: If you have money, don't lend it at interest. Rather, give it to someone from whom you won't get it back.
- Q1(6:30, 34, 35b): Give to the one who begs from you and [from the one borrowing] do not [ask back] ...

Another one of my key texts according to the hermeneutic I am using to understand Jesus and his movement as historical people. Likely two oral versions of similar but not identical sayings, Jesus here instructs his followers to simply give all their money away and become people who do not exist at an economic level at all. That is where giving your money away and not asking for it back would lead to, am I right in thinking? Once again, poverty and destitution is the purposeful course, reducing those who give to beggars to the status of becoming as beggars themselves. A Cynic might do this but do you know anyone else who would? Or why? How many people hearing this message from Jesus would actually and genuinely contemplate it, let alone actually do it? This instruction is unbelievably harsh in its requirements and consequences. Yet, if we recall, to such people belongs the kingdom of God.

36. The Leaven

- T1(96:1-2): The kingdom of God is like a woman who took a little leaven, hid it in dough, and made it into large loaves of bread.
- Q1(13:20-21): And again he said, To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like a leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it leavened the whole.

37. The Lost Sheep

- T1(107): Jesus said: The kingdom of God is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for the one until he found it. After he had toiled, he said to the sheep, "I love you more than the ninety-nine."

- Q1(15:3-7): Which one of you, having a hundred sheep, if [he has lost] one of them, [will] not leave the ninety-nine <at the place they are> and go [after] the [one which is lost], until he finds it? Just so, I tell you, in heaven he rejoices over [it] more than over [the] ninety-nine.

Two parables but, I think, a similar theme. This is, yes, the kingdom of God but also the notion of the Cynic as an educator of society. The kingdom, in the lifestyle of the Cynic, is like some leaven added to the dough of society which, given chance, works its way through the dough. Meanwhile, as shepherds of the flock of society, they care about each one. In both cases the actions and character of the Cynic in the kingdom are exemplified and typified.

38. First and Last

- T1(4:2-3): For many of the first will be last, (and the last will be first).
- Q2(13:30): The last will be first and the first last.

Scholars are weary of forms of this saying which are less than the absolute form conjectured of Q which is preserved in Matthew. In Mark, Luke and Thomas some mitigation is given to the saying making it less than absolute but, of course, imagining there was a pure, pristine form is likely a mistake in the first place due to the multiple occasions the saying could have been uttered. What is clear is that here is a saying about a reversal of values, social classes, economic stratification of people and the value system by which regular society is ordered which fits perfectly within a Cynic and eschatological scheme.

56. **Passersby**

- T1(42): Jesus said, 'Be passersby.'

A simple and seemingly contextless saying only found in Thomas. But is not a passerby an itinerant? Do we have a context for that?

60. **Blessed the Suffering**

- T1(58): Jesus said, 'Blessed is the person who has suffered. He has found life.'

Not a very popular saying with the Jesus Seminar who voted it black meaning they did not think it a saying of Jesus. Nevertheless, this is a saying that would fit well on the lips of any Cynic who saw in Heracles or Odysseus a hero who had suffered and laboured for his position in life and wished to follow their noble example. Consider this a more Cynic version of the earlier saying about 'carrying your cross'.

62. **Wealthy Plans Thwarted**

- T1(63): Jesus said, 'There was a wealthy man who had many assets. He said, "I will use my assets to sow, harvest, plant and fill my granaries with produce, so that I will not need anything." These were the things he was thinking in his heart. But that very night, he died .' 'Whoever has ears should listen!'

This, I think, is a Cynic/eschatological parable. Riches are denigrated and, furthermore, the plans to sow, plant and harvest are agrarian eschatological metaphors for the eschatological harvest God the Father might make in Jewish circles. The import of the

parable is that relying on riches is foolish and so it fits well in a corpus of material in which poverty is instructed of those who wish to be in the kingdom.

68. The Pearl

- T1(76:1-2): Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of the Father is like a merchant who had some merchandise. He found a pearl. That merchant was wise. He sold the merchandise. Then he purchased for himself this single pearl.'

The thing I notice about this parable is that the pearl's wealth must clearly be different to that of the "'merchandise' the parable likewise mentions. This fits well within this body of material as riches are still envisioned but not earthly ones gained in commercial activity. So this parable is once more against earthly riches and about a reversal of values.

70. Comparison and Paradox

- T1(81): Jesus said, 'Whoever has grown wealthy, that person should become a king. But whoever possesses power, let that person disown (his power).'

This saying is very much a riddle and I think the clue is identifying what kind of wealth, kingship and power is being talked about. We already know from the sayings I am surveying in this appendix that some types of wealth are favoured and some not, some types of power might be favoured and others not. What kind of wealth might make one a king? What kind of power should be let go? Let's say the 'wealth' is that of the kingdom and the power that which comes from commercial society: what then?

76. Woman and Jar

- T1(97): Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of the [Father] is like a woman carrying a [jar] filled with meal. While she was walking [on the] road still a long way out, the handle of the jar broke. Behind her, the meal leaked out onto the road. She did not realize it. She had not noticed a problem. When she arrived at her house, she put the jar down and found it empty.'

The kingdom is like meal leaking out of a jar that the woman carrying the jar does not realise is leaking. Its relatively easy to link this to itinerancy sayings and draw a conclusion. The woman may arrive home with no meal but those who find it along the way have been fed.

77. The Assassin

- T1(98): Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of the Father is like someone who wished to kill a prominent man. While at home, he drew out his knife. He stabbed it into the wall to test whether his hand would be strong (enough). Then he murdered the prominent man.'

This is a shockingly bloodthirsty saying about murdering someone prominent. How is the eschatological kingdom like this? It seems it is by the training and preparation required. The Greek word for 'training' is *askesis* from which we get the English 'asceticism'.

78. Brothers and Mother

- T1(99): The disciples said to him, 'Your brothers and your mother are standing outside.' He said to them, 'Those here who do the will of my father, they are my brothers and my mother. They are the people who will enter the Kingdom of my Father.'

In this saying Jesus is back to the subject of the family yet, once again, it is being pulled apart and reconstituted based on different values. Here 'the will of my father' does service as the euphemism of choice for the kingdom. Jesus considers those who act in accordance with the kingdom to have familial relations with him and his actual family bonds to have seemingly been dissolved in the process. This saying is, then, essentially the same as the similar one repeated in Mark's gospel.

79. Caesar and God

- T1(100:1-3): They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, 'Caesar's men extort taxes from us.' He said to them, 'Give to Caesar, what is Caesar's. Give to God what is God's.'

This saying is interesting as we must discern what Jesus seems to mean by his eternally intriguing and extremely clever reply. In Thomas this saying is shorn of its setting in canonical gospels since, as we know, the sayings of Thomas are almost entirely given without context except that we can fabricate from the collection of sayings themselves which is how readers or hearers of Thomas would also have had to appropriate them. Here, however, a simple setup is given, that of taxes being extorted. So, first of all, we may say what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say 'Don't pay your taxes' and so make himself an automatic enemy of Rome. Jesus, if he led a revolution, was not leading that kind of revolution. There is in Jesus' reply a sense of Jesus regarding himself as at arm's length from the political and civil authority and we may say that throughout the whole of the gospel literature Jesus is himself never seeking out either Roman or Jewish authorities to directly and deliberately engage them. Rather, he addresses such subjects if they find him in the course of his daily life as in this apparent literary context. Secondly, though, Jesus advises paying what is requested by Caesar but he adds in that

people should also give to God what is God's which acts to relativise the first instruction. If Caesar requires mere gold coins, which in several other sayings Jesus has advised those seeking the kingdom to give away, then what does God require? It is a way of implicating hearers in God's greater and more overarching requirements. It also directly contrasts earthly and heavenly systems of authority, two ways of viewing our existence.

81. Hidden Treasure

- T1(109): Jesus said, 'The Kingdom is like a man who had in his field a [hidden treasure], but he did not know about it. And [after] he died, he left it to his [son]. The son [did] not know (about the treasure). He took that field and sold [it]. And the buyer went and ploughed. He [found] the treasure. He started to give money at interest to whomever he wished.'

The point of this parable seems to be quite simple: the kingdom is itself riches. But we may also note that throughout the parable these riches are always available to both father and son yet they do not know it. Once one has the riches of the kingdom they can be shared with others.

84. Love Your Enemies

- Q1(6:27-29, 32-35): 'I am telling you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek as well. If anyone grabs your coat, let him have your shirt as well If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even tax collectors love those who love them, do they not? And if you embrace only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Doesn't everybody do that? If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what

credit is that to you? Even wrongdoers lend to their kind because they expect to be repaid. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend without expecting anything in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of God. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good; he sends rain on the just and on the unjust.'

This is a large complex of sayings that are arranged together with others as part of what many Q scholars regard as the opening instructional discourse of Q1. The context of the sayings appears to be a different standard to which those in the kingdom are held. If you do as others do then how are you different from them? I think it important to imagine a situation in which the things mentioned here - curses, being slapped, a coat being grabbed, giving money away, loving enemies - might be envisaged. I suggest this is not a normal, settled family life at home, perhaps with a family business. Instead, I think the context better suited to this is that of itinerant people, or those who might be thinking of becoming such. In that context such a speech as this makes sense to address the new situations and challenges imagined. There is also the final nature reference to consider here in which God's natural world provides for all alike. Overall, the sense is of a life rearranged for those in Jesus' movement who hear his instruction.

88. Now is the Time

- Q1(9:59-62): When another said, "Let me first go and bury my father," Jesus said, "Leave the dead to bury their dead." Yet another said, "I will follow you, sir, but first let me say goodbye to my family." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

The kingdom is calling and people have questions for Jesus. Can I do this first? Can I do that first? Yet you cannot look back. There seems a complete disparity between the life of regular society and that of the kingdom. One must leave the former to join the latter and not look back. You don't even have time to bury your father! Do you have the necessary commitment?

90. How To Pray

- Q1(11:2-4): "When you pray, say, ' Father, may your name be holy. May your rule take place. Give us each day our daily bread. Pardon our debts, for we ourselves pardon everyone indebted to us . And do not bring us to trial [into a trying situation].'"

The so-called 'Lord's Prayer' is, in fact, a very Jewish prayer no one would need to be Christian to pray. Any pious Jew could pray the same prayer. Yet what are the concerns here? We have God's rule over all, something parabolically extrapolated throughout these sayings, the provision of food and the pardoning of debts, sometimes translated into English spiritually as 'sins'. But is it really talking about such debts in historical context? What about actual, real, physical, monetary debts since we know the concerns of these sayings certainly interact with an economic, political and civil agenda? The 'trial' mentioned might and might not then be a 'final judgment'. All in all, the physical and the heavenly seem once more hermeneutically entwined.

91. Good Gifts

- Q1(11:11-13): 'What father of yours, if his son asks for a loaf of bread, will give him a stone, or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? Therefore, if you, although you are

not good, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the father above give good things to those who ask him!

This saying mirrors that of the earlier speech 'against anxieties' which was clearly a concern of those who heard Jesus. It seems to suggest an anxiety about knowing how a kingdom of destitute itinerancy might work out for good for those within it. Jesus' answer is that God is good and knows how to provide for those who put trust in his bounty.

92. Don't Be Afraid

- Q1(12:4-7): "Don't be afraid of those who can kill the body, but can't kill the soul. Can't you buy five sparrows for two cents? Not one of them will fall to the ground without God knowing about it. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows."

God's care over all is once again the point of this further saying in a context of seeming conflict with others with yet another nature reference.

94. Storing Up Treasure

- Q1(12:16-21): He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced in abundance, and he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this. I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods stored up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry.' But God said to him, 'Foolish man! This very night you will have to give back your soul, and the

things you produced, whose will they be?' That is what happens to the one who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich in the sight of God."

This parable reads very like that found in GTh 63 and, if it was in Q, it may be another item for the Common Sayings Tradition. Here this parable is even more starkly against those who use wealth and commercialization to their benefit which seems to be regarded as simply foolish in its own right. There is no suggestion that the 'rich man' is doing anything wrong with his wealth except basing his life on it and being a normal member of a commercialized society. It is such a society itself which is being impugned and "being rich in the sight of God', i.e. being in his kingdom, that is the point of contrast. Who do we know of in the ancient world who devalued currency in such a way?

96. Humility Praised

- Q1(14:11): "Everyone who glorifies himself will be humiliated, and the one who humbles himself will be praised."

There is a theme within Jewish wisdom literature known as "the two ways" where one, a wise way, is contrasted with another, a foolish way. We might think, for example in the teaching of Jesus, of the wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish one who built his house on the sand. Such a thing is what we have here but we must be careful to apply it very physically and materially. For who, in the world, would be likely to glorify themselves and who humble themselves? It must be related very carefully, then, to actual physical circumstances in a way that seems very reminiscent of Cynic concerns.

97. Life's Paradox

- Q1(17:33): "Whoever tries to protect his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life on account of me will preserve it."

This is a saying that likely has a history of at least two interpretations as a number of sayings from the Jesus tradition do. The first, and I think original, sense of this saying was that applied by an itinerant Jesus to his itinerant followers during a life of ascetic renunciation living from the land and the meals provided by those in sympathy with them. This was a precarious life that, as we have seen, produced anxieties. Jesus, then, reassures his followers that, regardless of how it might seem, they were actually preserving their lives. We need here to remember that a life of Cynic asceticism was difficult. It was a road relatively few travelled for just such a reason. Later, however, a second interpretation will be given to this saying for those who interpret Jesus in the light of cross, resurrection and apocalypse and in the face of Christian persecution. That was not its original meaning when inserted into Q1, however.

98. About Salt

- Q1(14:34-35): "Salt is good; but if salt loses its taste, how can it be restored? It is not good for either the land or the manure pile. People just throw it out."

The salt is those in the kingdom. But how shall they perform their Cynic-like task of preserving society if they lose their saltiness? Would they not become useless? They need to hold firm to their course and reaffirm their commitment so that they can perform their benevolent task.

Jesus the Ascetic?

Having addressed the general and found it replete with sayings that can easily be understood in Cynic and Jewish eschatological ways, and, I would say, without tripping over each other in so doing because they seem compatible agendas, I now want to address a particular that does the same thing. This is the idea, at first bold if we recall a Jesus who 'ate with tax collectors and sinners' and was regarded as a party animal, that Jesus was, in fact, an ascetic. If this were the case, for whatever reason, might this not also be compatible with a Cynic mentality as well as also being compatible with a Jewish eschatological one? We remember, after all, that Jesus was once associated with John the Baptizer who no one doubts was both an ascetic and eschatologically-minded in an overtly apocalyptic way. One notable scholar who has argued for an ascetic, eschatological Jesus is Dale Allison in his 1998 book, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, and I would like to interact with his arguments for a few moments here in pursuance of my Cynic eschatology thesis.

Allison devotes 44 of only 219 pages to his thesis that Jesus was an ascetic so we can imagine that he regarded such a proposal as fairly important to his reconstruction of Jesus, especially when we note that the first 40 odd pages of the book are devoted to undermining Crossan's, or anyone else's, methodological and algorithmic means to 'guaranteeing' any particular Jesus of history via the appearance of something scientific like inventories and tables of gospel layers and their proposed interactions with each other or lists of texts' multiple attestations. Allison, then, probably devotes around 25% of his substantive thesis that Jesus was a 'millenarian prophet' to the idea that Jesus was an ascetic. We get an inkling of the challenge Allison may have set himself here,

however, when the sub-heading to his chapter on Jesus as an ascetic is “deleting a consensus”. That ‘consensus’, of course, is the one that an ascetic was exactly what Jesus was not, although we might wryly smile and note to ourselves that this same consensus is one held by Christian believers who are likely not so keen on following Jesus that they might follow him into any potential asceticism themselves. It seems the Galilean is still causing anxieties with his extreme demands even 2,000 years later!

And yet, as Stephen Patterson asks in his essay “Askesis and the Early Jesus Tradition” from the book *Asceticism and the New Testament*, “What shall we make of someone who leaves house and home to pursue the life of a mendicant holy man, eschewing family, village, economic stability, and religious acceptance?” In the same essay Patterson further remarks of the material common to Thomas and Q that it is “clearly not employed in the interest of preserving the status quo”. So what is it about and can Dale Allison help us understand it? Allison opens his chapter on Jesus as an ascetic by noting that, primarily on the basis of two passages, one from Mk 2:18-20 and the other from Q 7:31-35, that Jesus is usually not regarded as someone of ascetic cast or intent. Here Jesus is the one carousing and socialising, eating and drinking. Yet Allison also notes that in the same gospels you will find texts that talk of Jesus fasting in Q 4:1-13, of him perhaps being a Nazirite in Mk 1:24 and of him fasting again in Matt 6:16-18. Here Allison speaks of the “eating and drinking” charges as a “creative remaking” of abuse that had been thrown at Jesus’ by his opponents. We see similar in Diogenes Laertius’ life of Diogenes the Dog as the Cynic, who is also reported to take meals in people’s houses, routinely receives insults he uses against his interlocutors. Perhaps, then, we should not take such charges so programmatically, especially where evidence of another lifestyle

propagates itself? “Many of the sayings of Jesus seem to demand an ascetic detachment’ from ‘exploitative society’”, Allison quotes Wayne Meeks as observing.

What suggests another research program for Allison is the pronounced evidence in the gospels of two definitive ascetic phenomena in that material. The first phenomenon is rejection of wealth which I hope I have already sufficiently demonstrated myself in the previous section of this appendix. It is, without doubt, manifest and could be expanded upon in the gospels more widely considered and the New Testament as a whole. The second phenomenon is more controversial and somewhat more shrouded in mystery yet it is, according to Allison, also demonstrable. This is the phenomenon of sexual abstinence and particularly of Jesus’ own sexual abstinence. Allison gives four references here to material he believes to be both authentic to Jesus as well as linked to eschatological purpose. These passages are:

1. Matt 19:10-12 where Jesus suggests that some may become “eunuchs for the kingdom” but that not all can accept this. This would not necessarily involve actual physical castration but does imply being without a wife throughout life and so no sexual intercourse of any kind. We may choose to view this as a ‘harsh command’ of Jesus yet, as with the lives of Cynics such as Diogenes who would roll in hot sands in summer and clutch freezing statues in winter to innure himself against the elements, it was not necessarily the case that he expected all like him to act in the same way. It might be sage advice but it was not expected of everyone. Further, and in support of this passage, we may note that on the few occasions Jesus’ family is mentioned, such as in Mark 3:31-35 and its parallels, a wife for Jesus is not. This would have been highly unusual in a Jewish context in which family and procreation were highly

favoured to the point of expectation. Last of all we may note that Cynics were seemingly single in most cases. Their purpose at large would seem to have clashed with the possibility of family life as may also have been the case with Jesus.

2. Matt 5:27-28 where Jesus prohibits lustful thoughts. Interestingly, Allison links this with those sayings which talk about what is inside making unclean. We might here also usefully recall the saying in which Jesus reminds us that you cannot get figs from thorns and there again in that example the mouth speaks "from the heart", i.e. the inside. What seems clear in the case of this saying is that such a thought is about the control and limitation of sexual desire in the context of the person in themselves.

3. Mk 12:18-27 in which Jesus is questioned by the Sadducees about the resurrection by the asking of what they thought might be a question that would catch Jesus out. The proposition was that a woman married to several brothers dies as do all her past husbands. Who, ask the Sadducees of Jesus, will she be married to at the resurrection, by which they mean the general resurrection that they, as Sadducees, did not believe in in the first place. Jesus replies that she will be married to no one as there is no marriage at the resurrection and people will then be "like angels" which is taken to mean that such heavenly beings do not engage in sexual intercourse. On an ascetic reading of this saying we might say that Jesus perceives an earthly order of sex and marriage and a heavenly one with neither. His own sexual abstinence would then be an actualized or realized anticipation of the heavenly realm, the kingdom of God.

4. Mk 9:42-48 in which Jesus recommends chopping off and discarding body parts rather than going to hell. Allison sees here a possible sexual reference if the mention of a 'foot' is biblically circumspect language for the male member as is common in the Jewish Tanakh, for example, at Ex 4:25, Deut 28:57, 2 Kings 18:27, Ruth 3:7, Isa 6:2, 7:20 and Ezek 16:25. If this is so then such a passage essentially says the same thing as Matthew 19:12. The point is the body may be treated harshly if the blessing of the kingdom is thereby attained. That certainly sounds ascetic.

What to make of all this? Allison states that

"Jesus and other celibates like him... have chosen their uncommon condition because, as heralds and servants of the approaching order, it is their primary duty to prepare people for its coming. There can be no time for marriage and children, no time for those consuming responsibilities. This is why, when Jesus calls others to the full-time job of fishing for people, he calls them to abandon their jobs, families and money."

In other words, Allison, who himself believes in a thoroughly apocalyptic Jesus in a way that I do not, thinks that the rejection of wealth, family and economic society that I have already made mention of as reasonable Cynic performance also makes sense, along with the asceticism of sexual abstinence, in a Jewish eschatological scenario as well. The importance of the kingdom calls for the necessity of sexual abstinence within the context of what I would call a Cynic, eschatological or Cynic/eschatological, practice. Furthermore, this, as I have already made mention, would be entirely countercultural in the context of a Jewish society. It would, in some sense, be a denial of the family values of that society. And it is not as if Jesus would be alone in that either. Allison goes on to

detail associated or similar impulses in the culture of the time and place more widely. For instance, he locates similar things in Paul, John the Baptizer and the Jewish sectarians who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls in Jesus' own century. He also makes mention of a much broader, Hellenistic phenomenon in which he implicates "the self-sufficiency of the Cynics" as an aspect of a growing fascination for ascetic responses to the world. We should perhaps then agree with Allison when he writes that:

"The lesson from all these examples is that enthusiastic eschatology and the self-discipline of abstinence, including sexual continence, have often gone together. When one believes that the world is about to go dramatically, one may let go of the world in dramatic ways; and to cease having sexual intercourse is one way of stopping the world."

So here was this Jesus, a rejector of wealth and family and now, apparently, of sexuality as well. It all seems to fit the profile of an ascetic and is hardly inimical to a Cynic formulation of the same either. Yet what, if anything, can we say his asceticism was for? Allison links it to "eschatological expectation" for five reasons that I would broadly support:

1. Dedication to an eschatological mission. This reason sounds very like the dedication, commitment and endurance required of the Cynic I spoke about earlier in this appendix. The common factor is that the purpose of the asceticism is seen to override the things that it leaves behind. The eschatological purpose, whether you see that as purely Jewish or Cynic/Jewish, was paramount and so life 'carrying on as normal' was no longer appropriate or sufficient.

2. Distance from the present world order. Jesus, and those in his community, clearly perceived of a world different from that in which they had been living. They could see a new, different and better one on the horizon. But to enter that world, to anticipate or actualize it, required leaving the old world with its attachments, responsibilities and encumbrances behind. Those in this new kingdom movement needed to put themselves at arm's length from the world much as the Cynics withdrew from the body of Greek civic society and were at arm's length from the city state. As Allison puts this: "If the social order is no longer going to exist, then its existing obligations are of comparatively little moment: one's business can no longer be business as usual."
3. Rhetorical persuasion. When Jesus and his followers roamed Galilee offering 'the kingdom of God' they were making a rhetorical claim and they were doing that whether you see what they were offering as a Son of Man at some future point 'coming on the clouds of heaven', much as Allison does in the end, or if you regard them as offering something much more present, imminent and actualized in their own actions and performance as I do. But, either way, it would be the case that the asceticism they practiced was part of the appeal for what they claimed as being the case. This practice was "a public and symbolic statement" of the various renunciations that their claims entailed. In a sense, it also functioned as a prophetic denunciation. As William James wrote in his classic study of religious experience, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "asceticism symbolises the belief that there is an element of real wrongness in this world." By renouncing what was wrong in their ascetic practice, Jesus and his community made a rhetorical claim to those who saw, heard or experienced it.

4. As a sign of judgment. This point follows on from the previous one but extends to cover not just practices or customs of the day but the form of the world as a whole. Eschatology, after all, is a matter of 'the end' of something. Here the Jewish theme of repentance may be a relevant symbol where repentance, in a Jewish context perhaps here best conditioned by the Baptist, means returning to God. Yet if that is seen as a little too apocalyptic we might ask ourselves simply what a group of people who detach themselves from society whilst deploring family and wealth, as well as largely ignoring the institutions of the day, are saying about the things they have left behind, especially if, in so doing, they implore others to join them. Have they not judged one form of the world in actualization or expectation of another? Here, the ascetical acts of fasting or sitting in ashes and wearing sackcloth, known from the Tanakh, are relevant Jewish precursors for Jesus and his fellows who may have turned up in some village in their poverty-stricken state without sandals, staff or provisions. What might those seeing them have thought?
5. As realized eschatology. As you may already have guessed now, due to several mentions already, I would prefer to change 'realized' to 'actualized'. This is because I see the kingdom Jesus and his people speak of as present in and through their practice rather than as some imagined realization with some significant event still imagined behind the horizon. It is not then, for me, what Allison calls "an anticipation of eschatological existence"; it is *a participation in and actualization of it right now*.

In summary, on the question of Jesus as an ascetic I can do little more than agree with Dale Allison himself when he makes his own summary statement:

"Jesus is reported to have told his followers to take up a cross. If he did so he was, as much of the Wirkungsgeschichte of the sayings suggests, asking them to do more than just endure the everyday sufferings that come to all people. He was rather enjoining them to enter, for a religious end, into some sort of voluntary suffering. This is precisely the demand that religious asceticism makes in all its forms. It requires genuine deprivation and sacrifice."

The only thing I would add to Allison's summary myself is a question: Do we regard that asceticism as Jewish and eschatological alone or do we regard it as Cynic and Jewish in its eschatological consequences? Do we need to choose when it seems that we can describe the Jesus and his movement that we find in his sayings in Q1, T1 and the Common Sayings Tradition via the interaction of both of these phenomena in powerfully explicative ways?

Conclusion

In many ways the identity of Jesus and his movement as ascetics operates as a key to a lock. It is a lock on a door that opens us up to the possibility of a Cynic and eschatological Jesus where they need not be things contrary to and at war with each other. Instead, they cooperate with each other and find a home in one man and his community. As Stephen Patterson says again in the closing to "Askesis and the Early Jesus Tradition":

"What the earliest followers of Jesus knew and, perhaps, what Jesus himself knew, was that life presents us with a script. We take our cues from the social world in which we are constantly immersed. This world has all the answers

we need to life's most pressing questions: Who am I? What shall I do with my life? What shall I value? Whom shall I value? The world provides us with an identity and an agenda. The world can script our lives, if we let it. The ascetic is one who makes a conscious decision to lay down the script, to step outside of conventional roles, outside of the familiar world of commonly assumed values, activities, plans, agendas."

Whatever Jesus and those around him thought they were about, they did not think that they were about Jewish society inside the Roman empire in Lower Galilee according to its prevailing arrangements in or around the third to fifth decade of the First Century CE. Crossan tells us in two of his magisterial books from the 1990s that the anthropologists report that we should expect something to have happened for the building activity that had raised up first Sepphoris and then Tiberias as commercial centres in Lower Galilee was soon bound to lead to trouble as their commercial effects worked their destructive and divisive way through the area. Patterson tells us that "The ascetic is one who ventures the performance of a newly imagined reality, drawing others to it in a radical display of otherness. This is what the itinerant social radicalism of the early Jesus movement was all about." We should, I think, pay attention to that too as we should pay attention to another scholar, Tom Wright, when he writes in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, that 'kingdom of God' functioned in the popular Jewish imagination of the time as 'the world of time and space' being 'put to rights'. Wright, as with Allison, finds it easier, in this case, to start from an apocalyptic Jesus and go from there to make sense of everything. But I do not. I get hung up on things like a salvific crucifixion, resurrection, future reappearances in the splendour of heavenly glory and the like in ways that these two eminent scholars and Christian believers do not. In *Jesus and the Victory of God*

Wright attempts to force his readers into a false choice between the eschatological Hebrew prophet type he sees Jesus as being and a Philo-like offerer of wisdom he regards the likes of Mack or the Jesus Seminar as putting before us. And yet, while that choice is manifestly and ridiculously false, I have maintained, not least in this appendix, that it can be refused on textual grounds because there is a better way which also makes sense of the earliest evidence. That way is the way of Cynic eschatology which takes insights from the Hellenistic phenomenon of Cynicism, and the Cynic performers it birthed, and the Jewish eschatology in which, very few disagree, Jesus must have been soaked.

It would seem that Jesus and those who bonded with him protested system, culture and society all in one go when creating a new society they thought of as 'the kingdom of God'. It is my estimation that they came up, in the first instance, with an idiosyncratic and rather unique mix of Cynic performance and Jewish eschatology in order to perform the kingdom of God they were about. It was not, we may say, what anyone expected. Yet it was not without precedent or explanation at the same time for everyone utilises the tools they have to hand in their time and place. It helped, of course, that Cynics were world deniers, certainly in the world's cultural and customary form, already. That they lambasted wealth, eulogized poverty, walked away from family, heard of the endurance necessary from Jesus and embraced ascetic practice for the greater kingdom good it may be argued is evidenced by the texts discussed in this book. You should feel free to delve further into the gospel traditions generally for more evidence of that for this study is far from whole and complete on that score. Yet, in the end, I see a non-Christianized Jesus movement focused on a new form of life under the Jewish God which they actualized and performed from the latter part of the third decade of the First

Century for at least a couple of decades, mostly in Lower Galilee, until, for reasons unknown, they faded away. The traditions they had created were picked up and carried on by others though and, as they did, they were changed into something else. Jesus himself became the focus and a return was hoped for instead. What had once been about actualization was now about expectation. What had once been about creating anew by your own actions became aping the structures of civil society. What had once belonged to the destitute ascetics became the gift of a priestly class and those who fawned on them. The message of Jesus in the earliest sources, "The kingdom of God is among you", became quickly and quietly forgotten.

PS There is, of course, one way that this thesis of mine of a Cynic and eschatological, but not apocalyptic or self-referential, Jesus could be permanently and irredeemably refuted: the apocalyptic Jesus could indeed come back as his followers assure us he certainly will - for the apocalyptic Jesus is a hostage to fortune. He *must* come back for his believers to be proved right. Yet if he never does, what then? How long are we supposed to wait and what will we be doing in the meantime?

How does this honour the poor, the kingdom of giving all your money away, the kingdom of God that is among you that the Jesus people I have discussed in this book were all about? And what about the very real people, poor, oppressed, strangers, that exist today in our still very real world? The Jesus I have spoken of was both material and spiritual. He did not fill you full of promises about tomorrow whilst being unconcerned about your physical needs today. If there are those who would see in Jesus and his earliest community an example then it may be that such concerns as I have argued they had may turn out to be as important today in our world as they were in theirs.

Epilogue to the Epilogue

"A historical Jesus entirely under our control is not historical enough. Genuine history, like reality, resists our domestications of it." (This Author)

Now, believe it or not, this is not a summary of ALL I wrote about Jesus and the gospels although, I grant you, it is quite a lot already. I have tried to include here essays that did justice to the ideas and thinking that made sense to me in coming to fictionalise a historical Jesus from the historical sources without simply reproducing everything all over again. All this content comes from six prior books. But there was a seventh book, the book in which I made my own stab at presenting a "historical Jesus book". Sadly, however, due to computer problems, that book was lost and so how I turned a Jewish Cynic Jesus into an anarchistic Yeshua, an example of someone engaging recognisably in "social anarchism", is now lost to us all. However, something I wrote after I had written all of my seven books, when I discovered that this had likely concluded my interest in Jesus, and came to reflect on them, did survive. And so I finish with that here:

This essay, intended to introduce this book, is about the historical figure Yeshua, popularly referred to as Jesus of Nazareth, and aims to cram into as small a space as possible several concise thoughts about him. It is intended to be something which will make you think about Yeshua/Jesus seriously but also to ask historical questions about him. Yet neither this preface, nor the book which follows it, is a religious text and neither is it an evangelistic one. I, this text's writer, have no desire for you to *believe in* Jesus and the point of this essay is not to get you to believe in him either. If you want to do that it is an option that is open to you but that is up to you and your reasons will be your own.

I am writing this essay for several reasons. One is that I need something to introduce the body of writing, now hundreds of thousands of words in length, that I have written about Jesus in the recent past, the continuance of something I began as a university student over 25 years ago when I was first introduced to the study of Jesus as a historical person. Although I was the valedictorian of my graduating class, in which modules and dissertations on Jesus played a significant part in my case, and went on to study for a PhD on the subject of the historical Jesus, I don't think this makes me an expert because one of the things all those years of interest and study have taught me is that what we know about Jesus in actual positive and demonstrative ways is quite small and always partial. Mere fragments of the Jesus of history find their way to us and they are quite often interpretable in more than one way which is why even professional scholars of Jesus and the gospels often have wildly divergent views about him. Most often, it seems, the deciding factor in this is how people approach Jesus in the first place. If you imagine, for instance, that the Jesus you are about to study is your saviour and Lord then it is going to be really quite hard to find anything other than that when you come to study him as a historical person. It would entail a complete change in your life and beliefs to do so, something which would take a lot of evidence. In the same way, should you think Jesus was 'just a guy' (or even didn't exist) then deciding he was something more than this would take a big change too. This is all to say that, when it comes to Jesus, where you start will go a long way towards deciding where you finish.

Another reason I am writing this essay is that, even today, there still seem to be quite a lot of people interested in Jesus. From my perspective, a lot of these people are interested in Jesus for their own, selfish reasons. Jesus seems to function for a lot of people as something they think they can make their own. He is their comfort blanket,

teddy bear and secret friend all in one. Why is this? I think in large part its because this is how people have become today in especially the Western countries where people are obsessed with social media, binge-watching Netflix, fast food, mobile phones and fake news. People today, if I may say so, are narcissistic and egotistical and they want the world of their experience served to them on a plate in a way that they approve of. (Its not simply their fault. Their culture has taught them to be this way and never to ask questions about it.) They want things to fit into their bubble. The one thing such people never question, in fact, is themselves and how right they are. This necessarily comes to affect their view of Jesus when they come to interact with him and they get the Jesus they want because, of course, the actual, real, historical person Jesus would have automatically been their friend and completely understood their problems and totally sympathized with them and all of their views. Does that seem very realistic to you? Does it seem very realistic that a 2,000 year old man from a different place to you who lived when the Romans were in charge and who came from a tiny village in the country would be *your* friend?

There was once a scholar and a humanitarian by the name of Albert Schweitzer. He was born in what was then Germany but is now France and he was notable for being a polymath. He was both a Lutheran pastor and, later, a medical doctor who set up a hospital in Gabon, Africa, then called 'French Equatorial Africa,' to treat the locals and live out his philosophy of 'Reverence for Life' for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. He is relevant to my essay because in 1906 he published one of the most famous studies ever made about Jesus as a human person. In this study Schweitzer discussed over one hundred years of previous study about Jesus as a human being, in the details of his life and what animated him, and he often criticised the views of those he had

discussed as both unrealistic and, therefore, unhistorical. Schweitzer's own view, and in this respect I think he was right, was that Jesus would appear as *a stranger* to our time. What animated him in the particularity of his time and place were his own immediate concerns, ones that Schweitzer thought were to do with the end of the world. So we cannot imagine that this man, no matter what esteem or respect we hold him in, could just walk out of the pages of history and be our buddy. In fact, so stark did Schweitzer's portrayal of Jesus as a man of his time and place appear that, some years later, Schweitzer had to write a second book with his medical hat on to show that Jesus had been a sane individual, sane for his time, at any rate. The truth is, the Jesus of Schweitzer's historical study did seem to be a bit of a fanatic.

Whilst I do not agree with every detail of the book that Schweitzer wrote, I do agree with him on one thing: Jesus wasn't like us. He wasn't like us because nobody living then was like us. It was a totally different world. In fact, it would be bizarre to think anything else. You only have to read the gospels of the New Testament to get a flavour of this, for example, where Jesus is reported to talk with the demon-possessed and they talk back to him. How often have you seen that? So what I'm saying here is that everyone who just thinks that, with a click of the fingers, Jesus is their buddy is engaging in an illusion of his domestication. That buddy called Jesus you have (which Kevin Smith turns into a punchline in his movie *Dogma*) is not Jesus from history. Its a nice, cuddly, fluffy version you've made for yourself instead. But don't be too harsh on yourself about that. People have been domesticating Jesus for a long time now. Right back from the very beginning, in fact...

You may be familiar with something called the New Testament. The New Testament is a collection of documents that over a few centuries Christians validated by their regular use and added to the Hebrew scriptures as a record of things they found valuable to their Christian beliefs. They thought this had come from the Jewish people historically but at the point at which Jesus arrived on the scene they differed quite vehemently with these same Jews about his significance. Christians believed Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, or Christ, and the regular Jews did not. Very quickly this meant that the historical movement that had begun with Jesus, which was nearly all Jews, became one that was nearly all non-Jews. The New Testament books the Christians wrote are interested in this Jesus who is the Christ and also in his death, resurrection and proposed return as a victorious judge and redeemer if we are to believe what these documents tell us. This is where the Christianity of today, which has many different forms and variants, comes from. Yet, to say the least, one might reasonably ask how its current forms have any connection to the man they claim it is all based on. In that same New Testament we find many images of Jesus - saviour, redeemer, Lord, Son of God, Light of the World, suffering servant, new Moses, wonder worker, - the list goes on. Yet these are all also in some way images suited to their narrative contexts and the purposes of the documents they find themselves in. As an example: a gospel is 'good news' in the Roman parlance of the time. Yet to write a gospel about Jesus entails thinking that something about Jesus, or Jesus himself in his entirety, is 'good news' in the first place. When that good news turns out to be that he was executed and that those who say they believe in him subsequently imagine him to have risen from the dead then we come to see that such stories are not your common or garden every day ones. The writers have something to sell.

Such stories are, of course, conjectures. This is not to say they are false. It is to say they are not proven. They can, of course, be proven by the claims that they make coming true. We all wait with baited breath, I'm sure. Yet for me, as someone who has studied Jesus historically in great detail, the most important question is to ask how *any* story about Jesus relates to who the historical person likely was. I have no real problem with people making up a Jesus as their own private fantasy. But it does become more problematic when people make up the fantasy and then proclaim the fantasy historical and try to use it to push public agendas. This is why, today, we have Jesus as the saviour of people who claim that the poor are worthless, when Jesus himself said "Blessed are the poor" and pronounced them as the owners of the kingdom of God, and why we have other people who think that Jesus is the friend of queers and transsexuals when these are categories of human beings that did not exist in ancient times, and so he couldn't have been their friend even if he had wanted to for such people did not ideologically exist.

Both of these kinds of people translate Jesus into the modern world, anachronistically, and end up with someone who works with *their* philosophy of life, quite often in mutually refuting ways. But they cannot all be right and unless they agree on who Jesus actually was in historical reality then they will always be talking about different people with the same name, their own private fantasies imagined as historical reality to justify current ideology. It is my view that we should always worry if something utterly foreign slips into our world quite so easily. It may be that we have not actually interacted fully with the historical reality of the thing at all. Such is often the case with Jesus and is a constant complaint even in the academic world where scholars are meant to work with the detachment, scientific process and neutrality their day jobs require. But do they? Not so much! It turns out they are prey to finding what they want to find just as much as

anybody else even if we may concede they often have to supply argumentation for doing so that the person in the street does not.

So all this domesticating activity begs the question of who Jesus was historically and this has been the focus of my attention, off and on, for significant parts of about the last 25 years, including when I was a university student of biblical studies and I took the subject of “the historical Jesus” as the subject of my PhD thesis. In the recent set of seven books that I have written about Jesus as a historical person (as well as the gospels as their context and major source material) I have had many things that I wanted to get across. One, perhaps my main point across the seven books, was that Jesus becomes a fictionalised character in literature. No connected narrative, letter, collection of sayings or imaginative tale is going to present Jesus ‘as he was’ and it is just naive to think so. We see this, in cameo, even in the gospels themselves. One of the incidents recorded has Jesus asking who people say he is. What is important here is not that someone might be said to have got the answer right but that Jesus got *several answers back*! We should, of course, expect this. Think of anyone you know and ask some of your friends ‘What are they like?’ and you would expect different and perhaps even conflicting answers in return. This is normal. People are not one thing. It is a matter of opinion and outlook. Writ large, the writings of the New Testament are grander examples of this. The gospels each have a view of who Jesus is as the writings of Paul, when taken together, do too, as well as the rest of the other documents do as well. Yet my point here is simple: these are all fictional points of view in the sense that they are all the views of other people about someone else. There is no “gospel according to Jesus” yet, and, even if there was, that would then only be Jesus’ views about himself. Have you ever known anyone who saw themselves a certain way and you didn’t agree with their picture at all? This leads to my

second point: fiction is tightly connected to interpretation. Having a view about something or someone is to have an interpretation *into which you fit* what you regard as the facts.

So where does this leave us regarding having a more historical view about Jesus? It means we have to be more critical readers and thinkers than we might otherwise have been. If we think that Jesus might have loved to watch the latest episode of *Black Mirror* with us then we have to wake up and realise that Jesus was probably more concerned with where his next meal was coming from than what was on a TV he could never have imagined. And besides, over 90% of the people of the time couldn't read or write. And English, as we know it today, didn't exist. As this applies to the major textual evidence for Jesus, which is basically gospels of one type and another, it means we have to be suspicious readers. We have to read for insight rather than for *their* meaning. Writers write to tell you what *they* want to say but they may likewise tell you things in passing that they don't want to emphasise, not least if we compare them with other writers writing about the same subject. Writers tell *their* story not somebody else's. Its why, for example, 'Luke' writes a gospel when, in his opening verses, he tells us that he knows of others. This is confirmed by scholarship when we compare Luke with Mark and find that Luke seems to have used just under half of it in his own book. But that same scholarship finds another source for Luke that he seems to share with Matthew. Scholars call this document 'Quelle', which is German for 'source' or Q for short. So Luke has two other source documents, at least, yet writes his own gospel anyway. Its not that there was necessarily anything wrong with Mark or Q. Its that Luke has his own story to tell. Yet it is this 'having their own story to tell' that we, as critical readers and thinkers, exactly have to be suspicious about. For, like the modern preachers of prosperity gospels or

alternative cultures that have a Jesus they want to co-opt for their agenda, gospel writers, too, are going to domesticate their subject and present him as the figurehead for their philosophies. Read with caution!

Of course, when I get to the part of my essay in which I say what I think Jesus was like as a historical person, which is this part, I am going to be saying the same thing. So, whatever else you do, please don't read me as saying that I am right and everyone else is wrong. Much nearer to the truth is that my historical researches lead me to believe that the way I see Jesus has some historical accuracy, or at least some relevance to a genuine historical situation, for which I can provide arguments. Other people are then free to disagree with that and think something else if they wish to. Hopefully, they give historical arguments too, not least because if they do they will seem more serious in their views than if they don't. 'I think Jesus was like this' but then refusing to offer any evidence or argumentation most likely comes from a place in which people simply want to believe what they want to believe unconstrained by history at all. Another version of this same approach is to insist that the New Testament gospels are a true, complete and inerrant record of the life, meaning and motives of Jesus and to then take an apologetic and defensive approach to them as texts. This is extremely dogmatic and also profoundly unhistorical for it refuses to recognise the circumstances of their creation in history as written by real people with real needs and concerns and about real events about which, necessarily, people will have differing views. It views them as ahistorical, magical artifacts that dropped from a divine spaceship to stop us having to worry about the truth. But, all this being so, in what sense can these people, the fantasists and the dogmatists, have then been said to have interacted with a Jesus who was a living, breathing, historical person at all? We all, in our own ways, want Jesus to be certain

things. Having a care for historical reality, however, involves realising that what he was might well conflict with that in ways we simply have to deal with. A historical Jesus entirely under our control is not historical enough. Genuine history, like reality, resists our domestications of it.

As you know by now, I have written seven books about Jesus and the Jesus I find in history was not a god, not a saviour, not a redeemer. The Jesus I find was a man and, to be honest, that should be the starting point for everyone. Next, he should be a man of Galilee in the first century CE, a Jew, that is. As he was in Galilee he should live in the shadow of the twin cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias which were built concurrent with his existence and which would have shaped the economics of his life. The Jesus I found in my research was a man concerned with the poor who were not people who couldn't afford satellite or cable TV but were people who were destitute, struggling for daily food and shelter. Jesus famously said of such as these, "Blessed are the destitute, for yours is the kingdom of God." I see in this, along with numerous other references to the poor and their opposites, the rich, the basis for beginning a sketch of the historical figure of Jesus. This was not a person concerned with status as the world judges it. In fact, he seems to engage in a complete reversal of the world's values in what he says and does and a rejection of mainstream society as it is configured in so doing. So, because of this, I find it hard to believe he went around giving titles to himself. That is completely out of character for the Jesus I see. This Jesus also has words of warning and criticism for people with any sort of wealth and not necessarily because they do anything wrong with it but *just because they have it*. The Jesus I see in history is the one who told his followers they must give any money they had away. And where does that lead?

So I think Jesus, were he to suddenly appear today in a Western city as he had been in Galilee, would seem strange and extreme to us. He wouldn't share 'our' values, whatever they are. He would not be interested in political gossip and *Game of Thrones* and fashion and *Red Dead Redemption II*. He would not be a leisured citizen of the West as most of us are. The vast majority of us would be ridiculously wealthy looking through his eyes and in wealth Jesus did not see what he called 'the kingdom of God'. Jesus was, I think, countercultural even in his own day. To ours he would seem completely foreign. He spoke of reliance on the Jewish god as a lifestyle and a committed choice rather than as an accompanying set of beliefs we might tack onto any others we happen to hold. In the gospels Jesus is reported as presenting people with a stark choice between the life they live now and the one they could live. One is to choose the kingdom, the other is not. What's more, this Jesus does not give you the option of looking back or inventing some kind of hybrid life. One way he expresses this is again in economic terms when he says "You cannot serve God and Mammon". Jesus was, I think, quite highly strung and absolute. He was not a man of compromises where this kingdom was concerned. He was no man who offered a "prosperity gospel". All he seems to offer his followers in earthly terms is poverty and struggle that will require endurance and cooperation. This might be exemplified in a quite extreme way when he speaks of not engaging in sexuality for the sake of the kingdom in Matthew's gospel which is in bold distinction to those today who want to make everything about sexuality. Meanwhile, for earthly riches this Jesus promises only to exchange them for kingdom ones if you make the requisite choices in life. The historical figure of Jesus I see was not a man who offered an easy life. He was committed, enduring and determined.

That is only a pencil sketch of the historical figure I have interpreted from the evidence in my own research. If you want more of that then skip ahead in this study to “Jesus and the Community Gospel” which gives much more detail on it and fills it out considerably, giving it some necessary historical context on the way. The point there is that Jesus was, if he existed, a man of history. So, if you dehistoricize him, then its this simple: you falsify him in doing so. Should you then worship said Jesus in a way that I do not then you have a false god as well. I am assuming that you do not want a false god for a false god would not be a god at all. It would, instead, be the safety blanket, teddy bear or secret friend I spoke of earlier. There is nothing necessarily wrong with these things but if you are basing your life around them it may lead to disappointment at some point.

Yet this leads me to a further point for, as a self-critical person and as someone well aware that in academia the prevalent image of a Jesus researcher is of someone who looks in a mirror and sees themselves, I ask myself what I think of the Jesus I claim to have found. Those who stand on the sidelines and sneer often mock and say that those who find Jesus, in any sense, only ever find a person who agrees with them, someone who, in some sense, supports them in the person that they are so that they don't have to change. This is all too convenient and all too easy, so they say. I see and understand this criticism and I think that a lot of people, those who take Jesus seriously as a historical person and those who don't, are indeed prey to this syndrome. In some respects I have been too. Yet I hope I have recognised in this essay that Jesus would not have been my friend. I think he would have found the world I live in to be the opposite of the kingdom of God he spoke about, not least because I don't live in Galilee and am not Jewish, and that he would have challenged me in ways I could not go along with and might not even have wanted to. I say this, of course, not even believing that he ever said he was special

or a saviour or the Son of God, which, if he had, would make me think he was disturbed at a fundamental level. Just as, in fact, anyone who came and told you he was the Son of God today. So I do not worship this Jesus that I have interpreted, neither do I think he wanted worship, but I do admire him from a distance as one who saw through the world of his day and had the courage to envisage another one and to call people to actualize it in their lifestyle. Indeed, perhaps that political aspect to his imagined existence even inspires me and I wish I could be the same, albeit I do not share the ideological and theological particularities of the world in which he lived. I see in Jesus a revolutionary of ideas, a person who made his ideas a lifestyle, a person who spoke of freedom from the unequal, unfair, civilised world as the kingdom of God in the articulation of an ethics as a politics. And that appeals to me. Perhaps that is why I read him that way.

The question remains, however, how do you see Jesus? How seriously do you take your study of him and what are you doing it for? Are you looking for someone to worship, a safety blanket, a comforter, a psychological crutch? How honest and self-critical are you in going about that? How open to critique and questioning are your views? Do you want a private fantasy, a defensible dogma or a public discussion about it? Unlike some in today's partisan world, I am not critical of those who find meaning in people of the past, even where they come to views with which I would not agree. It seems to me, however, that the important thing is that we question ourselves along the way about what we are doing and why and what purpose it is serving. If we do such thinking can then at least be put towards the necessary effort of personal growth if we are not to stagnate in our beliefs or as human beings.

Who we are is just as important as who he was, after all.

The Practice of a Cynic Jew

1. "Do not be anxious about life, what you shall eat, nor about the body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"
2. "Damn the Pharisees! They are like a dog sleeping in the cattle manger: the dog neither eats nor lets the cattle eat."
3. "Blessed are the destitute, for yours is the kingdom of God."
4. "If anyone does not hate his father and mother he cannot be my disciple; and if any one does not hate son and daughter he cannot be my disciple."
5. "Foxes have their dens and birds have their nests, but human beings have no place to lie down and rest."
6. "If you have money, don't lend it at interest. Rather, give it to someone from whom you won't get it back."
7. "The first will be last and the last will be first."
8. "Be passersby."
9. "Blessed is the person who has suffered. He has found life."
10. "Give to Caesar, what is Caesar's. Give to God what is God's."

Yeshua of Nazareth will be known to most readers as the personage at the centre of what is now known as Christianity. Pre-eminently, we read about him in the pages of the Christian New Testament. But it is not that Yeshua/Jesus that I want to speak about here - which is to say that I want to talk about the same historical figure but I do not want to present him as these Christian others have presented him and as their descendants still wish to present him today. In my own researches into the historical figure of Jesus - which are extensive and, beginning as an undergraduate in a department of biblical

studies, now extend to about 25 years of work and 7 books of my own - a different figure has emerged, a Cynic Jew whom I have, half jokingly and half seriously, described as Elijah the prophet of Jewish history crossed with Diogenes of Sinope of Greek fame.

To this figure are ascribed, to be sure amongst many others, the ten sayings quoted above. They are all, so I am going to argue, things of Cynic cast and so they are all matters in which, in some sense, we are encouraged to let go of civilised thinking and civilisation itself by Jesus of Nazareth. This, I want to say, was his own "there is nothing to stick to" where this is at least a letting go and a giving up of things thought regular and normal by those so civilised but not thought healthy or virtuous by Jesus himself. Putting these ten thoughts together, we will get something of an image of the mentality of a Jesus which you may wish to find suggestive of the historical character of the man in historical actuality - but here I do not intend to write at length about that as I have in other places below (at some length, I might add). Instead, I want to focus on the meaning of these sayings and what they have to say for a few brief moments as further prefatory remarks.

The first of the ten sayings I have chosen could easily have been said by a secular Greek Cynic of perhaps 2300 years ago - for it is standard Cynic wisdom. Cynics in general were known for being very lightly attired, a simple cloak being their only noteworthy item of clothing, and for eating whatever was at hand, often simply from what grew openly in the fields. They were not those who valued wardrobes of fine clothes or lavish meals, both of which would have cost money - about which more very soon. In both cases, in fact, we can argue that Cynics (and now apparently Jesus) were wary of such things and the decadence involved in them. In the context of virtue, the art of living well as a human

being, one has to ask after the consequences of coming to value fine clothes and exquisite banquets. Might they not seem to be diverting one away from simpler and more natural truths? Cynics valued simple lives exactly because they thought simplicity taught virtue. In that context, lack of simplicity, increasing complication, can only lead to lack of it. So here Jesus with his “Don’t worry about food and clothing” saying. He is teaching a simple and virtuous life in doing so.

The Pharisees were historically a school of Judaism during the Second Temple period of Judaism which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem [and so its temple] by the Romans in 70CE. Thereafter, Pharisaical beliefs would form the basis of what went on to become Rabbinic Judaism. They stood opposed to other forms of Judaism at that time such as the more elitist and priestly Sadducees or the more hermetic Essenes (if such existed) or the more politically confrontational Zealots. So it is a point in the historical favour of the texts that make mention of them in relation to Jesus that they are there. Pharisees were known for believing in an oral as well as the written law [which basically means interpretations and applications of what was written down in the Jewish law, the books of Moses], for believing in resurrection, and for favouring the second and third collections of books, the prophets and the writings, that would go on to make up the Jewish holy book, the Tanakh. They were a grouping, as we sometimes see in the gospels of the New Testament, which were concerned with a practical living of daily life in tune with the law of Moses and had developed complex rules and rituals for its strict obedience. As forerunners of what would become the major form of Judaism after 70CE they are an important grouping in the story of its history.

Not that any of this seems to have found favour with Jesus, however. The gospels report several incidents in which Jesus interacts with them which, even if fictional, speak to the relevance and importance of both him and them in the need for the text to address them. In chapter 2 of Mark's gospel, for example, we see related a collection of encounters between Pharisees [or their 'scribes'] and Jesus in which Jesus' activities clash with their established practices. Mark 7:1-23 is a further example in which Pharisaical rules for ritual washing are ignored by Jesus who teaches, instead, that "what comes from inside" is what defiles rather than dirt you may not have washed off, much less the lack of a mere performance of a ritual washing. But in the saying I have quoted above what we get is a condemning of the Pharisees whole and entire for their practice which Jesus sees as a blocking of the road ahead. There he accuses of them of blocking the road for all concerned by their procedures and so he essentially condemns those who will go on to be the religious authorities of the faith in their "civilisation" of Jewish religious beliefs. Jesus, instead, rails against the notion that correct living can be codified in the performance of rituals and speaks to a much more authentic expression of duty in a self-discipline which concentrates on intention and motivation. In Mark 7 Jesus can even accuse the Pharisees of, essentially, overcomplicating the matter of duty to God by making their codes and rituals the only allowable means to that duty's fulfillment. In so doing, he argues that, in fact, such understandings are nothing to stick to. All one has to do is have regard to oneself and one's virtue, for what comes "from the heart".

My third saying is another that is classically Cynic in its eulogising of poverty. Here Jesus pronounces the destitute (this word is purposefully chosen and is explained below in the main body of the book) - AND ONLY THE DESTITUTE - blessed. In doing so we must also

read this as the lack of blessedness for the wealthy and, indeed, a eulogising of poverty over wealth which, we may observe, is a complete reversal of civilised values. (Historically, this was a defining characteristic of Cynics.) Here Jesus does not say, in one of the verities of our own times, that "God helps those who help themselves" neither does he mention anything about work or earning money. He simply says that the highest riches he can think of - the kingdom of God - are the reward of the destitute which, as historical Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan points out, actually means exactly "the destitute", those who have *nothing*. Here Jesus seems to pronounce this blessing simply because they are destitute. It is their state of poverty which earns the blessing, suggesting, at the very least, that poverty is a blessed state to be in and we may note that this is not a thought of most conventional civilisations. We may then further compare this idea favourably with the reported lifestyle of Diogenes who lived by begging or from nature whilst skulking around the buildings of Athens or Corinth, perhaps sometimes making a discarded barrel or tub his home and having only a cloak for clothing. He, too, preached a simplicity of poverty as an aid to virtue and blessedness and he, too, saw wealth as an undesirable state which led one away from the reward of virtue. We may, then, see in this saying some of Jesus' own beliefs as expressed in his own, different context in that "the kingdom of God", which was what Jews generally longed to see, was a matter of poverty and being poor in earthly terms, a matter of a different set of values. Here wealth is nothing to worry about and nothing to fixate about even as, in my first saying, food and clothing weren't either.

In the ancient world the primary economic unit was the family. In this context my fourth saying seems to charge a coach and horses right through such an idea when Jesus says that there are things more important than this. Family, in fact, is clearly nothing to stick

to for Jesus who, elsewhere, was reported to have left his own family, which many conjecture may have been without a father figure since Joseph is nowhere mentioned in Jesus' adult life. His mother and siblings, then, may well have been relying on the eldest son for their survival as part of the family unit but he seems to have had better things to do, one of which was telling parents to hate their children and children to hate their parents. Elsewhere, there is a story about Jesus in which his genetic family members come to collect him but he refers to those who share an understanding with him in familial terms instead, this, in turn, suggesting that Jesus sees nothing to stick to in genetic kinships as the saying I quote here also likewise suggests. Of course, the context of this saying here is also one of being his disciple which means nothing other than following him, metaphorically or literally speaking. This is, then, a saying about the kind of virtue Jesus offers and what its demands may involve. Genetic family, and civilised understandings about its importance, are apparently irrelevant to him and what Jesus offers instead (a family of affinity and free association) is seen by him as the more necessary duty.

The fifth saying plays on the concept of rest but also assumes an itinerant scenario. Animals quite naturally build homes for themselves from what is to hand - from a few twigs for birds to a hole in the ground for a fox. But what about human beings? Jesus says they have nowhere to rest. But what human beings have nowhere to rest? Only those who have no home because they are wandering itinerants. This can be viewed here in a double sense as, on the one hand, a reflection on this state of itinerancy but, on the other hand, as a recommendation for we have only just read a saying in which Jesus tore the traditional family unit apart. If you have now become estranged from your family then it is quite likely you may have nowhere to live as a result. But given that Jesus

counts the destitute as “blessed” we should not see having “nowhere” to lay your head as a bad thing. On the contrary, with the picture that is being built up we may see it as necessary for virtue or a future state of blessedness, a blessing in itself, in fact.

With the sixth saying above we see the theme of poverty as one that is deliberately articulated and required for, should one do as this saying says, there can only be one result: your own destitution. Here Jesus not only tells people to ignore the prevailing civilised economic practice - lending at interest - but he tells such people to purposefully give it to someone who not only will not give them the interest back but they won't give them the initial money back either! This saying, then, displays a complete contempt both for notions of fair exchange and for market economics. Jesus encourages people to gift their money, if they have any, to people who won't pay it back which will inevitably result in their own poverty. We may consider, then, that Jesus sees little use for money except giving it away in a way that completely devalues it much as Diogenes himself was known as a defacer and devaluer of the currency of his homeland and, thereafter, of civilisation generally. There is absolutely no thought here for what can be done with money and its value as currency is completely disregarded. The thought is that if someone can be helped by the money then they should be and without the thoughts implanted by notions of finance or economics which may require getting something back for your trouble or other such ideas. Jesus, however, finds these notions nothing to stick to and implicitly judges and disregards them with this saying. If people need something and you have it, just give it to them.

The seventh saying makes sense of earlier sayings I have already remarked upon. It is simple, to the point, and a judgment and valuation of worth of people in civilised society

generally: "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." This is a saying that, very simply, disarms the social climbing and strata of social society and all that goes into such things, not the least of which is the wealth and possessions those thought by civilisation to be 'first' will have and those thought 'last' won't have. The saying consequently intersects very nicely with the "blessedness" of "the destitute" or with those who have left family and have no home and makes social hierarchy pointless since the saying pronounces these people the real "first" - regardless of appearances in the eyes of civilised society, and those who such civilisation lauds and honours as last. It is, then, an expression of a completely different system of valuation to that which civilisation uses and sets Jesus at odds with any hierarchical civilisation as it is presented to him in his time and place.

So, having got this far, we should not be surprised to find the simple saying, "Be passersby" as our eighth saying here, a saying which, quite simply, recommends itinerancy and encourages people to such a lifestyle. This lifestyle, as we have already seen, is one of poverty, lack of home and family and one without money. Such a lifestyle, we may rightly infer, does not involve living with the value system of society and civilisation as these sayings of Jesus are generally and consistently implying. Instead, it is about a different set of values and different ways to virtue. This, it seems to me, at least implies that the mode of living is implicated in the fruits, virtuous or otherwise, it produces. Can one imagine that Jesus would have recommended itinerancy where that itself was not implicated in producing the outcomes he wanted to see? Jesus, we may then argue, was about producing new forms of humanity and relationship much as other Cynics, by their habitual performance, were too. As such, being a "passerby" wasn't

coincidental to this: it was what it was all about and was an active means to a kind of “decivilisation”.

The archetypal figures for Greek Cynics were said to be Heracles, he of the twelve labours, amongst other things, and Odysseus, he of the twenty year journey home from Troy after the Trojan War. Both of these figures, figures about whom great stories were told, suffered, laboured or toiled and these things are eulogised later in Greek culture as essential to how we evaluate their characters. They are, in fact, why Cynics took them as their examples. This is highly relevant to our ninth saying here which waxes lyrical on exactly such a theme. Here “suffering” [although ‘labour’ or ‘toil’ do just as well as translations] is regarded as pertinent to reward which, in this case, is called “life”. Life itself, whether here literal or, more likely, metaphorical, is something that all people want so it is relevant that Jesus finds such a difficult but necessary road to it. We may have read the previous eight sayings with some disbelief as Jesus dismantled the evaluations of civilised society but one thing not there envisaged was that doing so would be easy or a walk in the park. Here Jesus explicitly acknowledges the burden of it all but that doesn’t make it any less necessary. Perhaps somewhat like Nietzsche, in this Jesus thinks suffering beneficial. Like poverty before it, suffering is a further path to blessing and what is necessary should not be put off by its difficulty. As in Heracles and Odysseus, such labours end up being matters of credit and vindication.

The tenth and final saying here concerns civil authority generally. Jesus, in his saying about giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s and giving to God what is God’s, relativizes the former by reference to the latter. For Jesus, God is the perfect example of virtue, although there is a lot more to it than this which we cannot go into here yet (that is what

the rest of the book is for). In my context here, however, the important point is that civil authority, and in his time and place there could be no greater such thing than that exemplified by Rome, did not have any call upon him except that which was its business and with which it was concerned. So here Jesus does not promote resistance to the state [he was being asked about paying taxes] but he does suggest that the duty to God [and so to virtue] is greater which might mean ignoring civil authority at some imagined future point. Indeed, I recommend a somewhat metaphorical reading here with “Caesar” doing service as civilisation and “God” doing service as the requirement to be virtuous which, in the context of religious myth, is thought pleasing to him. The latter should then clearly be regarded as the more important duty and the lesser only a relative one should you happen to be tangled up within it. If we imagine other, more civilisation-friendly things Jesus could have said in this context we will perhaps get a better handle on the cleverness of this saying, something which does not seek to overtly make an enemy of civilisation but which puts it in its place. It, too, is nothing to stick to.

Discussions like this, so I want to argue at the beginning of this book, are what the following pages are all about: the politics, fiction and history of Jesus (and, to some extent, their consequences). In what follows, I shall regard Yeshua as a Jewish man in and of history about whom other people write in things they label “gospels”. I shall go into what that means, and what these books are about, too as a necessary part of a comprehensive study of the historical character “Jesus” and the books which especially centre themselves on him. In doing so, I will come to conclusions and make regular observations taking up a position in which one interacts with professional biblical scholarship of the gospels and of a character called “the historical Jesus”, a further branch of academic biblical study. In fact, what follows is largely a catalogue of these

things as I have made them in multiple books I previously published separately. I now publish them together, as one, in a more settled, integrated and edited fashion and furnish them with a new ending which comes a few years after I first wrote the original content. What I have come up with, of course, is no one's final answer or the definitive truth about anything. But it is an honest account of someone seriously interacting with the historical figure of Jesus and the gospels and it is on this simple basis that I offer it to you as readers for your own, independent consideration.

"Any heaven this Jesus was concerned with was a 'kingdom of heaven' manifested on earth in and through the relations of human beings as a 'destitutes' domain'. 'The kingdom of God is among you' is what Luke tells us he said - and I take this very seriously to be the teaching of Jesus whatever others make, or made, of it." (This Author in "An Inventory for Social Anarchy: Jesus and the Destitutes' Domain")